

Leadership in the UK Public Sector: A Renewed Call to Action

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Introduction

The UK public sector is facing unprecedented challenges, with a growing demand for leaders and leadership to improve the delivery of sustainable public services. In this paper, Kirsteen Grant reflects on how changes in the public sector context are creating leadership challenges through placing the spotlight on a recent UK-wide Workforce Development Survey (WDS) conducted by the Workforce Development Trust in partnership with Edinburgh Napier University (Parry, Grant and Sheehan, 2019). Rachel Williams then presents a case study concerning a leadership development programme within Avon and Somerset Police, geared towards addressing some of these challenges within a policing context.

What are the key contextual drivers shaping the delivery of UK public services?

The UK public sector employs some 5.4 million people (ONS, 2017). In an era of shrinking budgets and changing demographics, organisations are facing increasing resource constraints while demand for public services continues to grow. Competing pressures are manifested in requirements to maintain or improve service quality *and* to generate service efficiencies. At the same time, advancements in digital technologies offer the potential for public sector organisations to innovate and engage at a deeper level with the citizens that they serve, enabling co-production of public services which are amenable, sustainable and future-focused (Christie Commission, 2011; Public Sector Leadership Taskforce, 2018). Current public sector reform programmes are therefore not only an attempt to save money, but also represent real opportunities to develop 21st century, world leading public services and public servants able to think and work differently (Needham and Mangan, 2016). In this context, analysts have argued that leaders' skillsets need to change, and that the type of leadership needs to shift away from emphasis on the *individual* leader towards *shared* or *relational* approaches whereby leaders

and followers work collaboratively to co-produce leadership at local and organisational levels (Grant, 2020; Reicher, Haslam and Hopkins, 2005, Reitz, 2015).

What are the key leadership challenges arising from this changing context?

The terms ‘management’ and ‘leadership’ are often used synonymously by practitioners, however scholars have long since argued that the difference between them is more than semantic, albeit that the roles performed by managers and those performed by leaders are complementary (Gabriel, 2011). Emanating from Taylor’s (1911) principles of scientific management, the traditional role of a manager focuses on short-term and tangible activities such as planning, organising, directing and controlling (*cf.* Fayol, 1949). In contrast, the role of leaders is often viewed as being less tangible and more long-term and visionary, even emotional (Bratton, 2020). Accordingly, leaders facilitate organisational change through establishing direction, aligning people with a shared vision, inspiring, motivating and empowering people to overcome obstacles to achieve the vision (Northouse, 2019).

Relational approaches to leadership also integrate both formal and informal leadership, highlighting that while a manager is a person who has a formal title and authority, a leader is a person who has the ability and opportunity to influence others and may not be in a formal leadership position (Reicher *et al.*, 2005). In other words, leadership is devolved throughout an organisation. This suggests that knowledge and acumen are perhaps more important than rank, which in traditional command and control led organisations, requires a significant culture shift (College of Policing, 2015).

The need exists, now more than ever, for leaders and managers to step-up in order to deliver – even exceed – the imperatives of public sector reform (Christie Commission, 2011; Public Service Leadership Taskforce, 2018). Analysts have called for a pressing need to enhance collaborative working practices and co-production of services within and across organisations (e.g. Audit Scotland, 2018; Chapman, 2018; Department of Health and Social Care, 2018). The concept of collaboration is not new, yet the realisation of more informal, collaborative leadership practices remains fraught with complexity. For example, a recent investigation into talent management and workforce development across Scotland’s public services (Gadsden *et al.*, 2017), revealed that organisational culture and leadership and management mind-sets often inhibited collaborative practice. In particular, organisational power, politics and competition often undermined opportunities and attempts to collaborate. Similar findings have emerged

elsewhere, highlighting that senior level workforce shortages and low attrition have been attributed, at least in part, to perceptions of low trust and blame cultures coupled with constant pressure and high professional risk (e.g. Anandaciva *et al.*, 2018; College of Policing, 2015). In sum, good – even great – leadership must be considered essential in delivering organisational priorities over the next five years and beyond. This sentiment is brought into focus by the latest WDS, which revealed that **81%** of respondents reported the need for improvement in leadership and management capability and action.

What do the survey findings suggest about current leadership practice?

The WDS (see Parry *et al.*, 2019) sought the views of employers across the public sector – in particular, health and justice.¹ Its purpose was to provide a measure of the extent and impact of skills deficiencies on public services, and the steps taken to minimise skills shortages across the UK.

Two critical and emergent issues raised questions about *change agency* and *motivation of leaders and managers* in the public sector; reflected in almost a quarter of respondents citing leaders and managers as lacking motivation to create and inspire visions for change. More generally, poor leadership and management were reported as having a ‘critical/major’ impact at the organisational level on competitiveness, including a loss of funding (72%), the need to withdraw the offering of certain services (65%) and difficulty in meeting standards (49%). At the individual level, leadership and management skills gaps were viewed as adversely impacting on employees by increasing the workload of staff (60%), reducing motivation (62%) and increasing absenteeism (53%), all of which lead to difficulties in implementing new work practices (52%).

Analysts have noted elsewhere that shortfalls in leadership and management may increase the likelihood of failings in other areas, which then have the potential to lead to systemic failings (e.g. College of Policing, 2015; Department of Health and Social Care, 2018; NHS, 2019). Similarly, the WDS findings highlighted that where shortfalls in leadership and management were identified, other aspects were more likely to be rated negatively (e.g. coping with challenges and collaborative working).

¹ In total, 645 people took part (76% of whom were employees and 24% represented employers). The public sector accounted for 67% of respondents (n=429).

We may conclude that ineffective leadership runs the risk of fostering a culture of distrust, cynicism and reduced motivation and commitment at different levels across the workforce. Developing and sustaining high levels of motivation and commitment are therefore critical leadership roles, and if leaders themselves become disenchanted and disenfranchised, their energy levels drop, they lose inspiration, have lessened influence and this is very quickly communicated (verbally and visually) amongst the people they lead.

We have noted the issue of change agency in the public sector as a critical WDS finding. Respondents identified the ‘pace of change’ and ‘change fatigue’ as particular challenges in the context of public sector reform. Related challenges centred on a need to improve communication and clarity during times of ambiguity and uncertainty. The report points to an expressed need for leaders to communicate expectations and engage employees in constructive dialogue (even when such conversations might be difficult). Building organisational capacity in more relational and collaborative behaviours will be critical to the development and delivery of future-focused and sustainable public services (Parry *et al.*, 2019).

What are the implications for leadership and leadership development?

The WDS identified a range of organisational and leader/leadership development activities, which included: changing work practices (44%); re-structuring (43%); an increased use of coaching and mentoring (38%) and increased training activity (37%). The following case study brings to life Avon and Somerset Police’s focus on leadership development within the broader context of public sector reform.

Case study: The Aspire Leadership Programme at Avon and Somerset Police



Background

Avon and Somerset Police is a medium-sized UK police force in the South west of England with around 5,500 employees in officer and staff roles. Between 2012 and 2016, the organisation was faced with a number of internal and external challenges, including a high profile police misconduct investigation and a lack of stability in senior leadership (having had five different Chief Constables between 2012 and 2016). This created workforce challenges in terms of morale, performance and wellbeing. The arrival of Andy Marsh as Chief Constable in 2016 brought immediate focus on understanding these impacts, and the design of an organisation-wide response with a focus on leadership quickly followed.

This process was supported by a programme board responsible for overseeing leadership initiatives across the organisation. This board reported into a Constabulary Management Board to ensure visibility and accountability for improvements around leadership. The programme board consistently sought and used staff feedback, including a recent leadership-specific pulse survey completed by over 1,200 staff; which in itself pointed to high levels of workforce engagement in shaping future leadership.

The ambition (and constraints)

Within weeks of taking Office in 2016, Chief Constable Marsh outlined his vision that '*Avon and Somerset Police would be recognised local, nationally and internationally as an outstanding police force*'. He provided clear direction that this would be delivered through improving the leadership and skills of the whole workforce, personally commissioning and sponsoring a Force-wide leadership programme, later known as 'Aspire'.

A clear priority from the start was to engage the workforce in developing the programme. The approach to building the emergent programme stood as a commitment to developing a visible and accessible programme for all, and not simply for those seeking promotional development. A variety of initiatives were incorporated in this process, including focus groups, a 'reference

group' of advocates and champions, a review of Force business data demonstrating areas for improvement, including data drawn from the staff survey and general Force performance. This process identified an overwhelming desire amongst the workforce to **have a voice** and a need for a **demonstrable commitment to work differently together**. The response was to design a 'contract' for all staff through a defined set of 'hallmarks of excellence' that all ranks and grades were able to sign up to.

The programme board's response to staff feedback and other performance data involved designing and commissioning a number of development initiatives, including the introduction of bespoke **coaching skills for leadership**. This programme is being delivered to all leaders from first line managers to executive level. The cultural impact of developing a coaching style of leadership (in contrast to the traditional command and control style) was perceived as having a range of positive impacts; notably improvements in individual performance and dialogue in relation to workload and wellbeing. Feedback from one colleague highlighted:

"Coaching skills are being used in bucket loads – this has really helped with various meetings".

As the Aspire programme progressed, the organisation's values were refreshed and a variety of new initiatives were incorporated. These included regular 'Think Tank' lectures with a range of diverse, non-police sector keynote speakers (notably James Timpson, Leroy Rosenoir and Kalpana Wolfe), a leadership exchange with an industry (non-policing) partner (Skanska), and the development of an academically accredited programme for aspiring middle managers. As the Aspire programme continues, it also provides a key strategic link between leadership and other core organisational workforce programmes including, for example, **inclusion and diversity and wellbeing**.

Key learning

On reviewing the programme outcomes, the board recognised that organisational leadership improvement is continuous, and while a well-designed programme can initiate a series of fresh insights, it takes considerable time for the benefits to be realised. Indeed, reflecting upon and refining the approach to leader/leadership development is constant and context dependent. Notably, creating the enabling conditions to empower and engage the workforce in on-going

programme development is a critical component, reflecting a ‘bottom up’ rather than ‘top down’ approach to leader/leadership development.

Identification of distinctive features:

- The need for strong visionary leadership and related support from the Chief Constable;
- Setting an expectation that every employee can be a leader and leadership development is for the whole workforce;
- Subtle adaptation of organisational culture through coaching by deliberately setting the organisational expectation of a coaching style of leadership;
- Setting clear targets and accountability through appointing an operational programme lead responsible for delivery.

Challenges encountered:

- Communication – the programme was developed during a significant period of organisational change and job insecurity. Austerity meant many roles within the workforce were under review while simultaneously trying to build leadership capacity. ‘Landing’ the messages at the right time and with the right tone was therefore challenging;
- Data – building an understanding of the contextually dependent nature of leadership was difficult at the outset due to a lack of data. Development of the Aspire programme generated a strong evidence base from diverse sources. Data are now available to all line managers, enabling a process of on-going reflection and development at both organisational and individual levels.

Summary

The Aspire leadership programme highlights the significance of leadership in modern policing. It was developed and adapted to encompass national police leadership practice through application of the College of Policing leadership principles along with local requirements and need (see College of Policing, 2015). Notwithstanding the positive outcomes emerging from the programme to date, this work must constantly adapt, develop and remain at the forefront of the Force’s people development strategy. This will help ensure that the organisation achieves its ambition of delivering excellent policing services amidst enduring drives for greater efficiencies in public sector delivery.

Conclusion

This paper reflects on a changing UK public sector context, drawing on a recent national survey to illustrate the extent and nature of key leadership challenges associated with this (Parry *et al.*, 2019). The Avon and Somerset Police case study usefully illustrates the unfolding and contextually dependent nature of leader/leadership development practices. It points to the need for leaders to become more agile and better able at working with and managing competing tensions arising from an imperative to ‘do more with less’. In particular, the traditional ‘silo’ and hierarchical culture often found within public sector organisations needs to give way to new forms of relational leadership with an in-built focus on collaborative working and problem solving (Bland, 2017).

Reflective Learning Activity

1. Identify three key learning points from reading this reflective piece?
2. What are the key implications and challenges for leadership in the public sector?

Kirsteen Grant

Dr Kirsteen Grant is Associate Professor (Work and Employment) at Edinburgh Napier University. Kirsteen draws on complementary backgrounds in organisational practice and academia. She has worked extensively in areas of strategic change management as well as organisational, professional, leadership and talent development. Her research interests centre on professional, responsible and precarious work; future of work; leadership; talent management; and workplace skills utilisation. Kirsteen has published a number of journal articles, book chapters and practitioner reports, and regularly presents her work at international academic and practitioner conferences. She is the current holder of a research grant from the Carnegie Trust to explore young people’s expectations of work and the contemporary workplace, and to compare these with employers’ expectations of the young workforce. Kirsteen is Editor of the Journal of Management Development (<https://www.emeraldinsight.com/journal/jmd>) and is passionate about bridging the gap between academic research and professional practice. She is a Chartered Fellow of the CIPD and Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

Rachel Williams

Rachel is Chief Superintendent at Avon and Somerset Police where she leads the Operational Support Directorate. Rachel's spent much of her early career as a Detective in both investigative and covert intelligence roles. She transferred to Avon and Somerset Police in 2012 as a Senior Investigating Officer in the Major Crime (homicide) department, moving next to Head of Public Protection, where she also became the Force and Regional Lead for Rape and Sexual Offences. More recently, Rachel became the Head of Operational Support, becoming an accredited Strategic Firearms Commander and Public Order Commander, and leading the police response to a number of high profile events including the Glastonbury Festival during 2019. In 2016 Rachel was chosen to lead the design and implementing of a new Force wide 'Aspire' Leadership strategy, an area of personal interest allowing her to develop further her passion to improve leadership across the whole workforce, for the benefit of the public.

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