

HIDDEN INSIGHT 11:
NETWORK LEADERSHIP



This Insight considers the environment and context within which leaders within the public sector are currently operating, highlighting the attributes and skills that are required to successfully deliver a multi dimensional style of leadership. Network leadership is a systems thinking approach enabling and empowering staff to develop broad collaborative alliances built on networks that facilitate the delivery of shared outcomes with partners and the community.

#NetworkedLeadership #Partnershipworking #Empoweringstafftodeliver #Devolvedpower #socialcapital

Empower staff	Pushing autonomy and empowerment down through the organisation
Motivate others	Motivating staff to achieve goals
Build team spirit	Addressing issues disrupting the team (network) functioning
Listen	Encourage others to share their views
Consult others	Encouraging team (network) to become involved in the decision making process
Communicate proactively	Sharing information widely with others
Network	Encouraging and assisting others to develop people networks
Manage conflict	Facilitating the resolution of conflict between others
Test assumptions and investigate	Questioning and challenging assumptions
Encourage and support organisational learning	Encouraging a culture of continuous improvement
Innovate	Questioning traditional assumptions and producing new ideas, approaches and insights
Seek and introduce change	Encouraging others to change inefficient work practices
Have vision	Encouraging other people to think about the organisation's long term potential
Adapt	Adjusting to change positively
Accept new ideas	Supporting change initiatives
Deal with ambiguity	Tolerating conditions of uncertainty

(The Rise of the Network Leader, The Corporate Executive Board Company, 2014)

The public sector has been in a constant state of change since 2010. Differing government strategies and priorities, and the increasing impact of the Comprehensive Spending Reviews have resulted in the cyclical process of reviewing structures, systems and processes. The public sector as it stands now bears little resemblance to that of ten or twenty years ago. And yet, one thing remains consistent, they exist to serve a public demand; demand that continues to increase, change and broaden.

In response to the above, most services have been going through an organisational change programme to identify how they might meet the challenges posed by austerity. In any change programme, leadership is one of the key elements of success: someone has to make sense of the disruption that occurs within the context of innovation: new ideas, new teams, new structures and/or new ways of working. Leaders must possess and demonstrate a range of skills and abilities that allow them to contextualise information and ensure that the resultant changes achieve the goal that has been set.

Within the public sector, leadership is multi-dimensional; there are the internal responsibilities of leading teams, managing performance and balancing resources; the external responsibilities, of serving the public and managing the complex matrix of partnerships; and within each of those, the continual change of personnel and roles - officers can often be required to adopt a range of leadership styles, dependent on context. Leadership Guru Ken Blanchard argues that 'expanding opportunities for involvement and influence must be used consistently throughout a change process'.

There is a clear logic to this that sits well in hierarchical organisations. Empowerment and delegation are key components of the transformational leadership style that has been central to public sector reform. However, there are certain checks and balances that have to be factored in if the processes of empowerment and delegation are to be successful. These include trust, confidence, empowerment and an openness to risk.

Leadership within the traditional organisational framework exists on a continuum from transactional to transformational. The transformational approach is characterised by setting direction, inspiring, motivating and stimulating others to achieve the organisational goal. This is contrasted with the transactional leadership style of tasking and delivering with little room for development or empowerment of others. In the current period of austerity leaders must do more than set direction, inspire, and drive tasks. A third role needs to be adopted, that of building and enabling employee networks: helping employees to maximise their contribution to other networks, and vice versa.

If the goal of the public sector in the future is to mobilise the community to do more for itself, research has identified that 'telling' them to do it won't work. It is important that future leaders adopt a networked leadership approach particularly when dealing with communities and partners. Linking the social capital conversation to the leadership conversation within the public sector is a logical step towards enabling communities and partners to develop a more productive and supportive relationship.

What is Networked Leadership?

Network Leadership is systems-thinking leadership which requires leaders to engage, empower, facilitate, and bring

‘connectedness’ to an otherwise unwieldy mass of disparate elements. Networked Leadership is a challenge to the ‘command and control’ environment of many of our public sector agencies because it is more about influence than control: it is an indirect leadership style that requires leaders to create an environment that is based on autonomy, empowerment, trust, sharing and collaboration.

On the face of it networked leadership fits neatly with the requirements of a program seeking to address social capital, by focusing on the trust, norms and networks of any society. However, organisations have to adjust their performance management systems and leaders may need to re-balance their capabilities and skills to effectively build social capital. The pressure in relation to performance management, especially across organisations, may mean that this is a step too far.

Some public agencies are renowned for (and rightly proud of) an ‘action’ oriented approach that secures immediate results following the implementation of a new system or a new programme. However, sometimes patience is required to see a programme unfold and to be able to learn from issues as they arise without imposing an immediate solution. When building social capital and working with communities, at times, learning is as important as the possible solutions that need to be put in place.

This is not something that sits comfortably with some: indeed only a short time into a MutualGain programme questions such as ‘when can we see some results?’ and ‘what impact is this having?’ were being asked. To build cooperation and knowledge sharing across the organisation, network leaders must be effective at facilitating the co-design and co-production of services with their partners and the community. Research has shown that leaders who are not disposed to innovate or empower will find it difficult to engender a clear sense of common purpose which is a key factor in the success of any collaborative program.

Several competencies, including adapting and accepting new ideas and testing new assumptions relate to the ability, willingness and, perhaps most importantly, the desire to introduce change and take on new challenges in unfamiliar situations.

What are the characteristics of a Network Leader?

Networked leadership helps those (sometimes without positional power), instinctively develop and exploit broad based alliances, resulting in improved performance and problem solving. The networked leadership role is often not formally defined and is therefore invisible, affording individuals the opportunity to move within and across organisations, building relationships as they go. They belong to informal networks of other like-minded people and they strategically connect people carrying ideas, support and stories throughout the organisation.

Potential benefits

The efficacy of the public sector post austerity may well rely on how they build and maintain networks with partners and communities. There is a clear link between building social capital and using the networks that exist in communities. Using a networked leadership philosophy that encourages trust, confidence and empowerment will develop staff and enable them to build those relationships with partners and communities. The greatest benefit potentially rests with those who do not hold a leadership title, but may in fact be a leader – those on the frontline.

In MutualGain programmes, those who show a commitment to experimentation, and value the role of frontline leaders, connect with people they hadn’t connected with before and strengthen relationships with those they had previously connected with. They bring together the practical ‘can do’ approach of work with their respective colleagues to deliver well structured engagement activity designed to improve networks and connections and build better relationships. Their role will be invaluable as the agencies move forward and leaders will need to know how to lead in a new networked fashion: our programmes highlight and encourage those who do this naturally.

And what of the active citizens who are leaders within their own communities? There was a great deal of evidence of network leadership from the active citizens who MutualGain work with - maybe that is to be expected. Their whole reason d'être is to develop networks and encourage people to access the right resources to solve problems. Perhaps they are in the best position to show statutory agencies how to do it well?

Within the public sector it may feel risky adopting and developing a networked leadership style; but the potential return on investment makes achieving the goals of a radical new public service possible.

020 3887 2859
info@mutualgain.org
www.mutualgain.org

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