

# Where next? Leadership in uncharted territory



With the General Election 10 months away at the most, the biggest leadership challenge facing the civil service is maintaining momentum and a sense of purpose, says **Gordon Tinline**

**A** senior civil servant said to me recently that his biggest leadership challenge at the moment is trying to find a sense of direction in a climate where “we need to wait for a general election”. It is not hard to imagine this becoming a common response to requests for strategic clarity at the top of the civil service. This seems somewhat alarming given that we might still be 10 months away from an election, but it reflects the cyclical reality of leading in the public sector.

So how can senior managers keep themselves and their staff motivated and productive in a climate where it is difficult to have confidence in the direction of policy and strategy, or provide answers when staff ask what they should be driving towards?

Kouzes and Posner (2004) in their excellent work, *The Leadership Challenge*, highlight “envisioning the future” as one of five key leadership practices and note: “People commit to causes, not to plans.” This may be where public sector leaders have an advantage in being able to tap into the deep and shared underlying values that form the public service ethos, a foundation that can serve as a constant values-based motivator.

However, there are obvious risks in relying solely on this ethos and it is likely to be frustrating for staff if senior managers frequently fail to provide clear policy direction in favour of making an appeal to a vague service ethic. This may be particularly challenging for middle managers, who feel

they are being asked to keep their staff motivated and engaged in a climate where there is increasingly less policy direction communicated from above and fewer resources available. It is understandable, though not excusable, that some in this position become cynical and complicit by adopting a “tell me about it, I’m as much in the dark as you!” attitude. This is obviously undesirable – so what can be done to avoid it?

Three areas of organisational practice are critical for finding direction amid uncertainty: scenario planning, superordinate goals and positive emotional experience.

Scenario planning is now a well-established strategic response to uncertainty. It is essentially a “systems thinking” approach used to simulate and better understand possible future scenarios. Practising this approach is not self-indulgent navel gazing – so no need to feel guilty about spending time doing it! Scenario planning can increase our awareness and develop our readiness to respond to a broad range of possible futures. One psychological advantage it brings is a perceived increase in the sense of control that leaders have – and by encouraging involvement in the process this can spread to others too. If you accept the value of this approach, it is important that leaders negotiate the time and resources required to implement scenario planning effectively, particularly when there is a lack of strategic clarity.

Goal-setting is the most firmly established and accepted motivational approach in management practice. Superordinate goals are underlying shared goals that can be identified and communicated when more specific objectives are difficult to find. They are goals that can only be achieved through collaboration across organisational boundaries and partnership working (eg increasing life expectancy, reducing teenage crime). Pioneered by the work of Sherif and his colleagues half a century ago, the identification and sharing of superordinate goals is

particularly powerful when relationships are becoming strained as a result of uncertain or narrower conflicting objectives. The emphasis on public sector leaders is to work across silos and departments to identify clear service goals that can and should unite staff, refreshing their underlying sense of purpose. Even in uncertain times, who could argue with aiming for increased patient satisfaction, shorter waiting lists or reduced infection rates in the NHS?

Positive emotional experience is critical in maintaining staff wellbeing and engagement. The psychologist Barbara Fredrickson highlights the role that positive emotions play in broadening our capacity to deal with the world effectively, including uncertainty, helping to create a state where we are better at building coping resources. Positive emotions are contagious, so leaders need to consider how they can engineer situations where staff enjoy themselves and experience/express positive emotions. This is likely to be considered a luxury by many and may be seen as inappropriate in the current economic climate.

However, there is a growing body of evidence that positive emotional experience is clearly linked to a number of desirable organisational outcomes, including improved performance. The qualifying factor here is that positive emotions must be balanced and underpinned by a strong sense of purpose – feeling good has limited value unless employees are united around shared objectives that they believe in and that benefit the business.

None of this is to suggest that senior leaders should just tolerate a lack of policy or strategic direction. It is important that senior public servants continue to push politicians to provide the clarity they require to enable them to serve effectively. There is a need to challenge and manage upwards right now. Not to do so weakens leaders’ sense of control and effectiveness, which, in turn, is likely to be detrimental to leadership capacity across the public sector.

However, it is inevitable that there will be a period of some inertia and increased uncertainty in the run-up to a general election and public service leaders should consider adopting practices such as those highlighted here to maximise their ability to control what they can and prepare well for the future – regardless of its political colour.

“

How can senior managers keep themselves and their staff motivated in a climate where it is difficult to have confidence in the direction of policy or strategy?

”

**Gordon Tinline is a director of Robertson Cooper Ltd. [www.robertsoncooper.com](http://www.robertsoncooper.com)**