

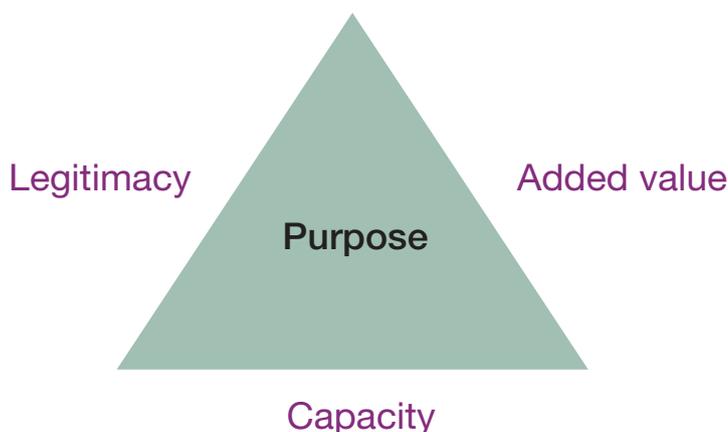
# Leadership in tough times

Public service leaders are under increasing pressure to achieve more with less. They are charged with improving social outcomes, helping us to become healthier, safer, better educated, more employable and even happier.

They achieve this by providing, commissioning, co-ordinating, monitoring and evaluating public services against a series of targets devised by different bodies. This requires managing large, ever-changing, complex organisations and establishing effective partnerships of various types. These leaders are now expected to take responsibility for the well-being of all those who live and work within their area while sharing responsibility via devolved decision-making.

In the light of this, our leaders need to establish a clear, focused purpose for themselves and those they work with. They need legitimacy in the form of government policy, local mandates and strategies, expert and professional opinion and public support. They need to demonstrate how all aspects of their services or functions provide real value to our citizens and they need to manage and increase capacity at all levels of the organisations and partnerships in which they are involved. The work of Mark Moore (see diagram below) prompts challenging questions for all leaders about their role in adding public value.

## Adding Public Value



Based on: Mark Moore, Harvard University Press, 2007

## Overview

### The aim of leadership in tough times

- **Creating the potential for service commissioners, providers and users to work in different and more effective ways to enhance well-being.**

### Concepts and skills for leaders

- **Leaders need to 'read' themselves, others and the environment in order to make appropriate choices about how best to deploy their leadership energy and skills**
- **Public value is underpinned by a strong sense of purpose, legitimacy, improved value and creative decisions about capacity**
- **Leadership is built on relationships**
- **Leaders need to continue their investment in leadership development throughout their organisations, partnerships and communities.**

## A tough time

None of this is particularly new but the current recession is exacerbating the dilemmas that public sector leaders need to resolve. At the same time, they are subject to more, and different, forms of accountability, scrutiny and criticism. Turnover among top people is increasing and over 50 per cent of those working for the public sector report they feel stressed. This is now our biggest cause of absenteeism. Many staff feel vulnerable and anxious about their future; low morale is becoming the norm. Resilience is becoming the latest 'must-have' attribute for leaders. Perhaps in response to this, there is an increase in calls for 'leadership for well-being' and for those in public services to be passionate rather than passive, creative rather than compliant, and wise rather than wasteful.

## Who are the leaders?

The current times require the highest standards of leadership and management. But no one person can encapsulate all the qualities, knowledge, experience and skills that leadership in tough times requires. Leadership is, ultimately, a relational activity and our observations of outstanding leaders point to their overriding ability to work effectively with others. Everyone, at all levels, working in public services needs to improve their leadership. Those in senior positions need to help create the most conducive conditions for this to happen.

We believe there will be particular challenges ahead in refocusing the expertise of professionals with long-standing ways of working towards different roles and



relationships. Many senior people in organisations are reluctant managers and hold their professional autonomy dear. We need to engage in different conversations about leadership across professional boundaries in order to craft services that reflect more fully the lives of citizens and service users. There is urgency about the need to do things differently – particularly in the light of the financial climate, but this must not be at the expense of real dialogue: candid and respectful conversations that enable us to become more reflective as practitioners. Leaders need to demonstrate that they are really prepared to listen to different perspectives on service improvements. They must also set expectations that all their staff do likewise.

We believe that leaders need to focus on three levels of analysis when deciding how to act:

- their own self-awareness and self-management (for which supportive and challenging feedback is essential)
- their ability to read others' needs, abilities and preferences (informed by deep listening and a preparedness to understand different mindsets)
- their understanding of context from an international to a local perspective (underpinned by the ability to analyse complex information).

Leaders need to make sense of issues and need hard evidence, insight and a creative outlook to make good decisions and to communicate persuasively. Good leaders must choose carefully where they invest their energy to achieve the greatest effect; OPM helps them to make these decisions more consciously.



## Can leaders become more effective through development?

Our approach to developing leaders takes these factors into account. We work with leaders on their self-awareness using a range of psychometrics, 360 degree instruments and feedback exercises. Our aim is to increase understanding of behaviour patterns, hooks and triggers and leaders' impact on others. We coach senior managers and use this focused time to determine the best course of action.

OPM tutors help participants develop an understanding of problems by analysing data and processing information about the connections between policy decisions, strategy implementation and outcomes. We encourage participants to think about issues more creatively and to critique others' ways of doing things to find innovative solutions. Our approach to 'lean leadership', for example, encourages leaders to provide the space for clarification of service user and citizen needs, for front-line staff to be involved in analysing the added value of different stages of a process and for managers to make appropriate streamlining decisions. We emphasise the importance of communication and provide opportunities for participants to rehearse key conversations, presentations and negotiations.

## Leader development is different from leadership development

Most leadership and management development programmes focus on individuals, their attributes, skills and behaviours and how these are deployed to address their particular challenges. But we would argue that this is only part of the story. Public services also need to develop better leadership systems: effective partnerships, high-performing teams, purposeful service-delivery units and robust consultative arrangements with service users and citizens. Leadership development is best conducted in situ – using real time and live issues as the vehicle for learning and development.

For example, we are currently developing an approach to coaching top teams that melds our understanding of coaching techniques, team dynamics, strategy and the creation of public value. Our bespoke programmes encourage focused conversations between participants, which enable them to suspend their own assumptions and habits and to work with



different perspectives more effectively. Development interventions that include the people who really have a stake in service improvement have a much greater potential to make a real and sustained difference to service delivery.

We believe that leadership development should always go hand in hand with organisational development. Enhancing leadership throughout an organisation requires culture change and our work with organisations that are developing more of a coaching and learning culture has been a fascinating example of the synergy between leader development, employee engagement and better aligned leadership systems.

Programme design should always bring context into play as well as more prosaic factors such as size of group, level and experience of participants, cultural expectations, group diversity, accreditation preferences, duration, timing, cost and learning environment. Increasingly, there is a need to demonstrate creativity in programme design. We recognise that for effective learning and development to take place, we must accommodate different learning styles. We aim to make learning an enjoyable experience and we particularly enjoy working with people who have interesting leadership and management experience and are interested in improving their own and others' practice.

## Does leadership development work?

One of the main challenges facing both leadership and management development providers and their clients is that it is difficult to evaluate impact. But we simply

couldn't continue doing what we do if we didn't truly believe it makes a difference. The evidence is eclectic:

- comparative (or longitudinal) quantitative measures such as reductions in turn-over and absenteeism
- acknowledgements from participants, line managers, coachees and clients that say development interventions really made a positive difference to the way they now behave
- insightful comments on the application of learning to specific projects, dilemmas and leadership challenges
- the individual successes of clients (we enjoy long-term relationships with many senior people)
- internal evidence such as staff surveys
- projects that have been implemented well with tangible results
- positive assessments of organisations and partnerships that clearly result from effective focused leadership.

We believe that being a public sector leader is one of the hardest jobs there is and that the vast majority of leaders are extraordinarily effective. Our job is to help these extraordinary people through the tough times ahead.

Photos: iStockphoto Bo1982/Dave Bolton/P Fluegl

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## About OPM

OPM works to develop the effectiveness of organisations that are committed to improving social outcomes. Our current activities include organisational development, management and leadership development, futures, strategy formation, service re-design, change processes, stakeholder engagement, community development, communication, executive coaching, research and evaluation.

## Contact us

OPM: 252B Gray's Inn Road, London WC1X 8XG  
tel: 0845 055 3900, web: [www.opm.co.uk](http://www.opm.co.uk)

Lesley Campbell, OPM director for leadership development  
tel: 020 7239 7859, email: [lcampbell@opm.co.uk](mailto:lcampbell@opm.co.uk)

