

# Effective leadership for unitaries

Martin Tucker gives some advice about how the new unitary councils should handle the setting up of their new top management structures

A challenging period of change lies ahead for new and existing unitary councils. Transformation, by its nature entails upheaval. Managing disruption, harnessing energy and sustaining motivation will be priorities over the ensuing months. New organisations need reshaped infrastructure and top teams to progress and deliver. Existing organisations should also prepare for people moves. Radical change requires resource: almost always, the investment of time and skill is underestimated.

To provide some meaningful context for the impact of unitary change upon senior teams, GatenbySanderson recently undertook some research amongst chief executives who had been through the unitary process last time around. It was clear that all of them would have done some things differently and here is a summary of their advice:

## Preparation and process

Up to 50% felt that they had failed to anticipate the impact upon their senior team and consequent recruitment needs. Speed to market was seen as essential to secure the best people. Most underestimated the time involved to recruit several senior team members at once and were overwhelmed by the ensuing work load feeling that valuable, strategic and planning time was taken up by process. Appointing an experienced consultancy was key.

Openness, honesty and transparency were frequently cited as being critical to longer term success. Recruitment was viewed as the first

stage of building the new organisation and establishing its culture. While plans and a clear process are vital, a degree of creativity and fluid thinking is needed to help manage a complex and intense process. As one chief executive said: '...with the best will in the world, you have to probably tear up the rule book just to get things done and make quick decisions.'

One difficult challenge is balancing the need to achieve longer term goals, while tackling shorter term issues. IT systems and staff terms and conditions were highlighted as areas that should be resolved right from the start. A clear infrastructure needs to be in place for finance, HR and associated regulations - there is no one size fits all solution. Flexibility and adaptability are needed to make things happen. These need to be driven from within.

## Impact

Clarity of vision, purpose and expectations from the chief executive were felt to be essential components in mobilising senior teams. After long periods of uncertainty it is essential that existing teams are committed, united and confident of their future contribution. Championing positive change, anticipating workloads and establishing shared team objectives provides focus and a common goal.

The role of HR is key at this stage. They must develop a strategic plan to manage the impact of change and agree policies in advance. New unitaries should appoint a chief executive quickly and give

him or her the freedom to act swiftly and make decisions. This ensures that momentum within the organisation gathers, otherwise performance can dip. Think about training requirements that may help with the process, including members.

## Engagement

It's no surprise that communication was seen as a priority. Regular briefings, honesty and a clear direction are needed to keep senior staff informed, on track and on board. Harness the enthusiasm and energy of senior staff and put it to good use immediately. Early departures can cause major gaps that threaten to topple the agreed plan so be ready with

interim resource. Be aware that most staff will be more concerned with their personal rather than the broader vision of the new organisation. As well as tackling issues quickly, communicate decisions effectively.

## Summary

- Speed will give you a key advantage – be decisive, flexible and creative in your thinking when required otherwise you'll always be playing catch up.
- Find the best people you can – legal, HR & finance will be critical
- Don't leave gaps - use interim resource to drive immediate change
- Tackle immediate issues, however thorny, and avoid long transition periods
- Don't let the detail take you away from the bigger picture
  - Harness positive energy, maintain momentum, keep staff motivated and on board



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