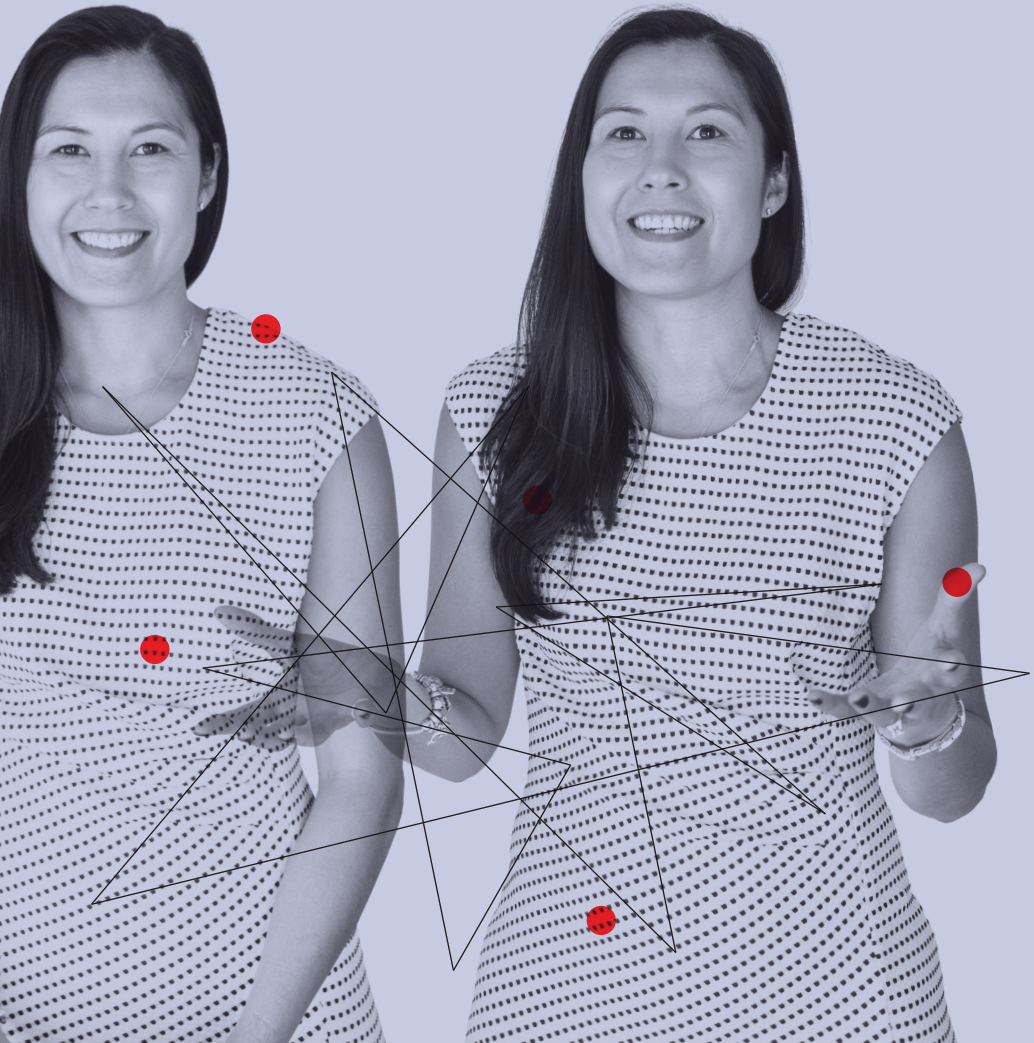


Pace, Partnerships and Pioneers

Public service leadership & the challenge to build better futures



Introduction

For public services under increasing strain, inspired leadership will be the game changer. Many organisations are convinced they have played their trump cards already: budgets cut and shaved further; service delivery outsourced; organisations reshaped and partnerships created. Is it any wonder those at the top are asking, “Where next?” Most Chairs and CEOs, however, quickly realise that this is only the start, and not the endpoint, in transforming services to complex communities that demand more when less is available. So where do leaders go from here? What hand will they be dealt next?



For almost two decades, GatenbySanderson has supported government and the wider public sector to find and develop top leaders for its critical Board and senior positions. In that time, change has been the single constant in our conversations. The need to evolve, reform and, in many cases, transform service delivery has created entirely new demands of those who lead. But has our understanding of what makes an effective leader kept up with the pace of change? Or are we relying upon old models of management? In this paper we examine the factors that really make the difference to outstanding leadership in public life – factors that, if harnessed, will allow us to reap returns on the investments made in wide-reaching transformation programmes.

Rising to the challenge of public sector leadership and thriving in a constantly shifting landscape is only for the resolute. Requirements are increasingly complex at a time when the world is far less certain and its citizens more vocal. Increasing pressure for public organisations to deliver higher quality community-focused outcomes, the rapid rise of technology and a lack of funding to go around creates a pressure pot that inspired leaders will use to innovate and diversify. Less adaptable leaders may well go into meltdown. So how do organisations identify the pioneers from the rest; those who will truly lead organisations into new territory as opposed to those who plan for but never quite make it to the new world?

Any picture of a traditional 'hero' swash buckling at the head of their organisation should quickly be dismissed. Today's pioneers, whether they are changing the machinery of government, establishing devolution through combined Authorities in local government or enabling strategic mergers in housing or the NHS, need to shift mind-sets beyond their own organisational boundaries to deliver increasingly without direct control of resources or decision making.

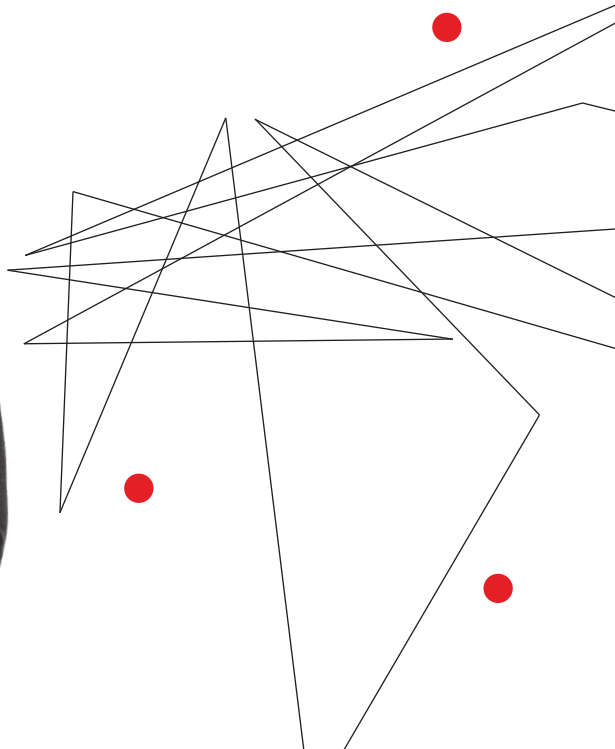
In thinking what will make these new organisational models thrive, CEOs and Chairs are rightly asking, 'Is our strategy adjusting to the forces of change? How future ready is our current leadership cohort?' and 'Which of our people has the most potential to move into senior leadership roles?' With increasing accountability at the top, is it any wonder that the pipeline of individuals wanting to - and ready to - step up for senior leadership roles is, at times, quite sparse?

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According to McKinsey, some 75% of large scale change initiatives fail to fully meet programme objectives. Why? The primary reason is that organisations fail to secure permanent or temporary change management expertise to navigate the change itself. This is further exacerbated by the secondary reason for failure, which is that many organisations lack the leadership capability to operate in the new world: skills for the past just don't cut it in the new world.

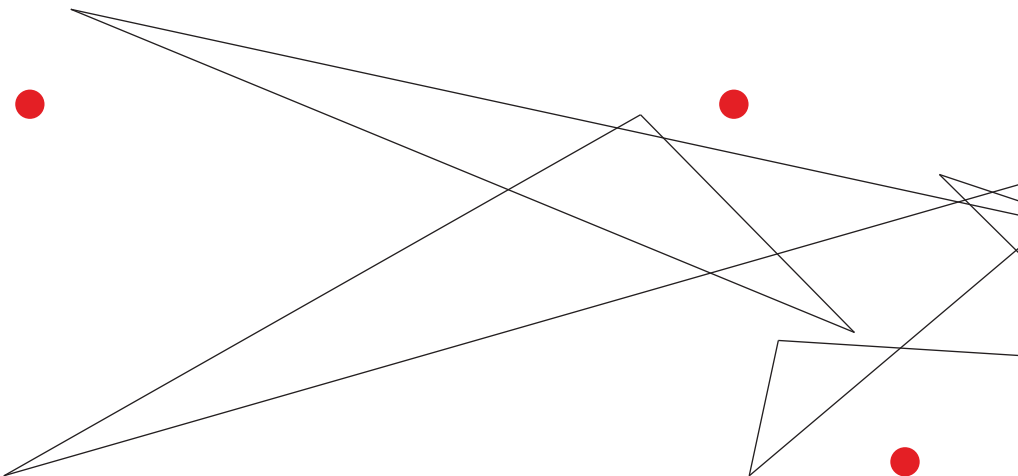
So herein lies a leadership dilemma. On the one hand, 21st century leadership – where change is the new norm – requires resilient visionaries to navigate new, uncharted paths. Yet the operational demands of day to day delivery can imprison leaders in the here and now and paralyse progress in anticipating and developing future solutions. While there is no single blueprint on which to model future leaders, it is clear that the future needs a new kind of cultural and behavioural leadership ‘norm’. Hierarchical authority and heroic leadership will carry far less weight in the future public services landscape. The age of the pioneer has begun.



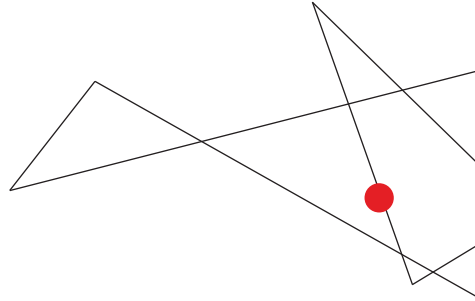
A new Lens on Leadership: from Hero to Pioneer

Leading through uncertainty and complexity takes a certain presence of mind, levels of self and social awareness, strong beliefs and values to take the road less travelled and often alone. Pioneer leadership fundamentally moves away from the stereotypical 'heroic leader' whose role is to lead their teams into battle and victory is achieved through their actions and their ability to build followership by winning hearts and minds. What's the problem being a hero or heroine, some might ask? Surely a leader should be the personal heartbeat of transformation: one who people look to shape the future, define and communicate the strategy and vision; to inspire and motivate followers; assign roles; evaluate and reward performance?

These heroic elements are important, of course, and our national study into the characteristics that differentiate outstanding leaders in public life has determined several characteristics that separate good leaders from great ones. The research highlights the downside of heroic leaders - who risk creating dependency rather than encouraging ownership - which is bad news if an organisation's objective is to develop an extended team of leaders or a culture of distributed leadership. At a time of change, where employees should be encouraged to challenge the status quo and think differently, followers of the disconnected hero will experience unnecessarily difficulty, thereby stifling innovation. Worse still, as challenges and problems arise (which they will always do) hero leaders will find themselves stuck firefighting, unable to see beyond the horizon and focus on their strategic responsibilities.



So what defines this new Pioneer style of leader? It's a type of leader who is agile in approach, commercial in thought yet, at heart, committed to better citizen outcomes combined with an underlying propensity to deliver results. A pioneer challenges the status quo, which may not always be comfortable for their board colleagues, but they are also able to create a vision and pathway which people engage with and readily sign up for. The pioneering founders of the "new world" could not have colonised had they been unwilling to leave their home shores, repeatedly deal with the unknown, experience failure several times over and convince their loved ones to do it all with them.

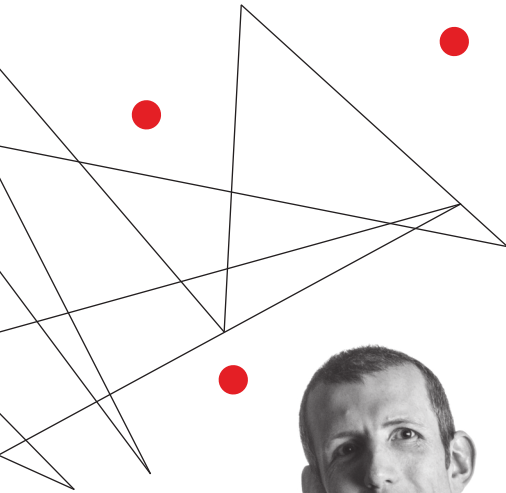


GatenbySanderson's national research identified the following profile for pioneers:

Courage and tenacity in the face of disruption: 'there are no rules anymore'

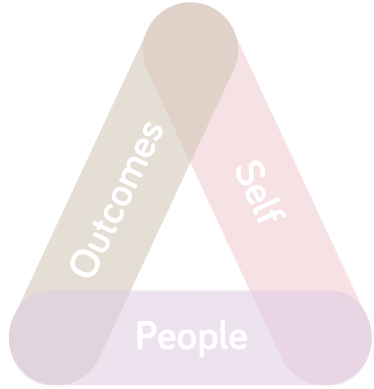
It is inevitable during significant periods of change, that plans don't always work out as intended and senior leaders face serious dilemmas – problems that through no fault of their own, cannot be solved or turned into win-win situations to the satisfaction of all. We therefore need leaders to have the courage of their convictions and the tenacity and authenticity to make decisions, learn from mistakes and continue in the face of failure.

Traditionally, in hiring to board level roles, organisations are instinctively drawn to candidates who can provide a narrative with a neat beginning, middle and end – speaking in glowing terms about a successful business turnaround, programme or initiative. We can often under value or avoid talking about failure, be that an idea that didn't work out or an iterative process of 'trial and error'. Pioneers will almost always have faced failure and those that go on to succeed will use failure to their advantage. When assessing potential pioneers for their tenacity, creativity and fortitude, it is these non-linear narratives that recruiters need to tease out and examine.

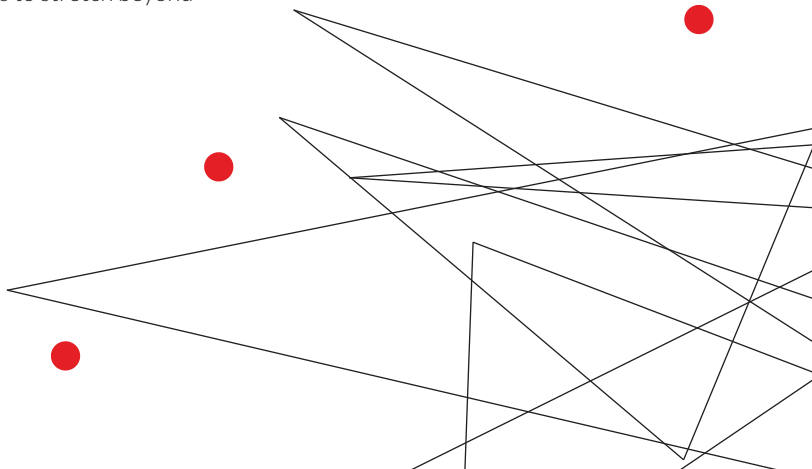


Our research, based on the ongoing assessment of almost 1000 CEO and executive candidates under the Altitude Model, GatenbySanderson's framework for benchmarking effective leadership within public sector, revealed that despite strategic outlook being a strong trait in the research group, a relatively low number of executive and board level leadership applicants demonstrated 'courage and tenacity' as a strength. This was slightly higher amongst Board and CEO candidates compared to those moving into executive roles and featured slightly more prominently amongst health sector leaders.

This poses a challenge in terms of how we spot and develop more leaders who aren't afraid to do what's never been done before, who encourage growth for their organisation, the people around them and the broader community. High potential leaders on a progression trajectory will increasingly be grilled on their ability to look above the organisational parapet, actively seeking partnerships, staying current by spotting and adapting best practices elsewhere and by grasping opportunities to stretch beyond the status quo.



 Altitude



Long term vision to tackle tomorrow

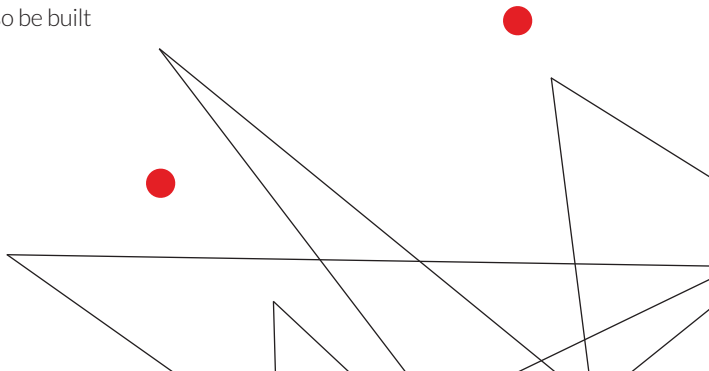
Our respondents overwhelmingly reported that pioneering leaders need to think with a long-term lens. In a pacey world and amidst the numerous priorities they already have on their 'urgent' pile, they need to push boundaries further and consider how to harness advances in future technology and thinking, not just those hitting our consciousness today. Those that pioneer change have real vision, and act upon it. Leaders need the ability to fast forward ahead and adapt leadership accordingly.

Our research revealed reasonably high scores across CEO and Board candidates when it came to futureproofing talent agendas – defined as valuing a diverse workforce and recognising the need to bring in new skills to tackle the seen and unforeseen. This characteristic was slightly higher in females than in men. On the flipside though, the average score was low for board level skills for 'tackling tomorrow' – being constantly transformational about the way in which the organisation operates thinks and delivers services. Going forward, organisations should question their recruitment processes to better attract and test this competency. Measuring attitude to risk to safeguard against any 'safe pair of hands' bias should also be built into the process.

Influence, impact and driving strategic change

In the face of uncertainty and constant change, leaders need to be able to build relationships, effectively communicate with and influence others. Increased cross-organisation collaboration and new pan-sector delivery partnerships complicate this challenge. Where services are increasingly delivered across traditional organisational boundaries, leaders need the skills to not just talk about breaking down silos and building team unity but delivering it. This is not about navigating existing boundaries to build new partnerships, it is a mindset whereby pioneers prioritise vigorously, create clarity of direction and followership and see frontiers rather than borderlines.

Our study revealed a strength in across senior public leaders for making relationships count and for building team unity suggesting an understanding of the need to build followership. Interestingly, when challenged around using complex influence and impact strategies to engage and inspire, our research cohort revealed lower scores, suggesting a reliance on rational, linear, more traditional influence strategies.



Balancing a commercial head with a social heart

In the face of intense pressure around funding and financial sustainability, public services and non-profit leaders must have 'a social heart and commercial head', balancing compassion for citizens and service users with a hard 'commercial' outlook that is curious, willing to experiment and take risks, able to admit failings, reflect, learn and apply lessons to a corrected course going forward.

Given the current financial pressures, leaders need to identify new funding models to ensure the effective delivery of vital public services. This could involve the exploration of public and private partnerships, refined commercial arrangements and other models not yet considered. We need our leaders to provide vision for how services will operate, and they also need to be commercially savvy in order to broker these deals. All of this needs to be done with the resulting experience of service users in mind.

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Thinking beyond traditional boundaries is no longer enough; it's not seeing a boundary in the first place.

CEO Local Government

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Consumer rights, customer service and competition is a more alien concept.

Chair, Higher Education organisation

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Our research revealed that only a very small proportion of CEO candidates possessed real strength in this area. This percentage decreased further amongst those applying for other executive senior roles and was slightly higher in men than in female leaders. Ensuring organisations have the processes in place to identify those that do have ability here is crucial. Leaders need to ensure they constantly innovate delivery, protect margins and find new revenue streams, whilst ensuring quality for end users.



Forget culture, create new collective mindsets, from the top

In today's uncertain times, pioneering leaders who experiment to create a high functioning, thriving organisation can be met with resistance, both from staff and from the very top.

Starting at the top, we see some Boards, which on the one hand espouse to moving into the "new" world, but in reality, have members who individually or collectively struggle with letting go of "old" traditionally held views and practices. Pioneering is therefore not without pain and can create a tension between the pioneering leader and their board colleagues.

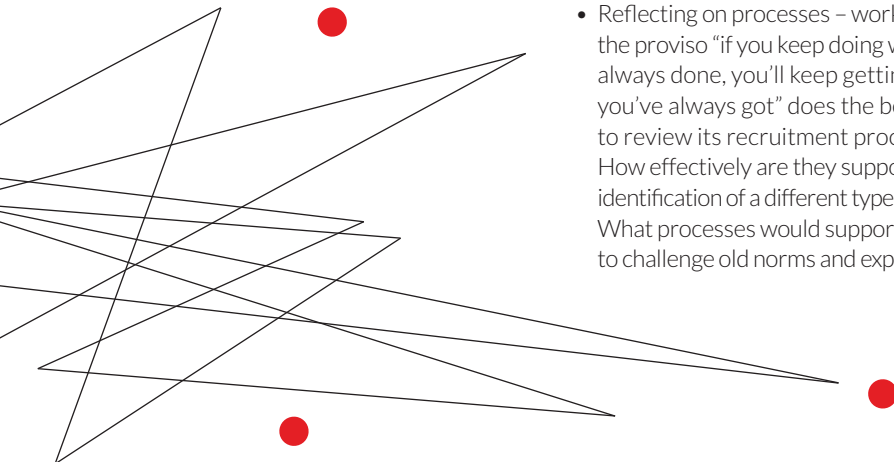
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Pioneers are agile thinkers, who can shift perspective from dancefloor to balcony, present to future in a heartbeat.

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Recognising and working with this tension can be the key to accessing the full capability and potential of the board. If diversity of viewpoint drives innovation, then being aware of and addressing differences is a useful starting point. Change happens through conversation and communication. Conversations that can support your board to move towards being more pioneering in their outlook can include ones about:

- The board's relationship to risk – how does the board view risk? What would enable the board to be more experimental? What would be the worst thing that could happen if the board let go of some of its traditional practices?
- Recognising and agreeing behaviours that support cohesive team working – how well does the board know and understand each member? What behaviours does the board recognise as critical to pioneering in their space? How does the board and executive team measure up in accepting that standard?
- Reflecting on processes – working from the proviso “if you keep doing what you've always done, you'll keep getting what you've always got” does the board need to review its recruitment processes? How effectively are they supporting the identification of a different type of leader? What processes would support the board to challenge old norms and expectations?



From convention to a new dimension: changing people processes to build leadership legacy

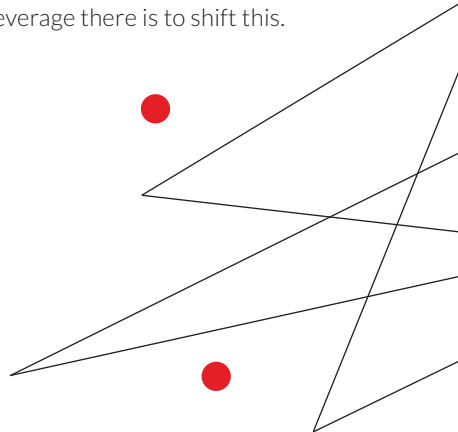
If we aspire to have leaders that break the mould, pioneer change and have the courage to innovate under more empowered public services, we must break the hiring mould too. Until we stop judging leaders by yesterday's benchmarks and familiar viewpoints, we may be setting our leaders up for failure and inadequately shifting the dial at a systems level to equip organisations with future-ready leadership.

So, how can public service organisations ensure they identify, hire and develop leaders with 'pioneer potential'? What skills and behavioural patterns are most desirable? What changes can be made to the recruitment and assessment processes?



To recruit, develop and retain leaders who can be pioneers for your organisation, it's worth considering:

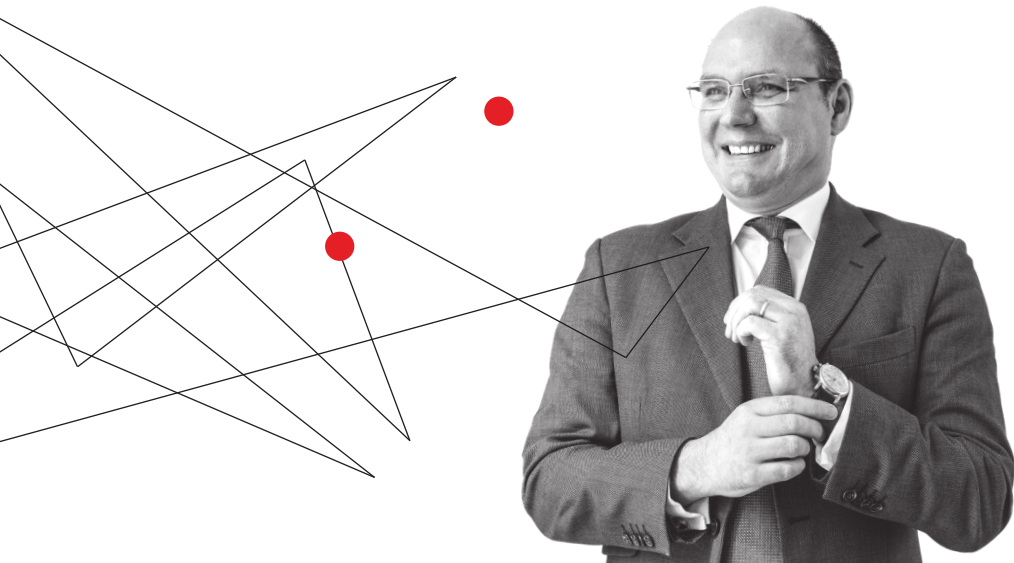
- How and where might things need to change? Recruiting a pioneering leader who are contra cultural means they will need careful onboarding and support to help them through the transition and achieve success.
- In the context of your own strategy and the challenges you face, what do you need from your leaders? It's valuable to consider what you can do to make expectations clear, take a staged approach to induction and to not allow the current culture to reject those who are different. This is about spotting anticipated pitfalls and making plans to address these.
- How much are you and your board prepared to shift your mindset? At the end of the day, our point of view and the way we see the world fundamentally impacts how we act and behave. It takes courage and tenacity to create a future which is different from the past, so consider how wedded you and your board are to past based thinking and what leverage there is to shift this.



- Challenge the definition of 'a good fit': we should be aware of unconscious bias against self-starters and risk takers – those character traits don't need to equal 'trouble'. If we warn decision makers off reliance on data, structure and process and start to select, onboard and develop people with a 'strengths mindset' – spotting and valuing their transferrable skills - we might go some way to tipping the balance in favour of cultures that will give pioneers the best chance of success. Ripping up 'vanilla job descriptions' and advertisements automatically widens the talent pool.
- Avoid the 'on-boarding dip' – so often we see organisations shifting up a gear to identify more diverse talent pools and skills and experience from 'outside the box'. Sadly, many organisations invest in rigorous assessment to identify role and culture fit but fail to use the data gained in assessment to help the candidate maximise impact in the new role.

Addressing questions such as 'what are the things our organisation can do to ensure this different style of leader lands well?' And 'how can we support this leader to drive a pioneering agenda?' are key reflections for any board taking a measured risk in a key appointment.

Tearing up the rule book is always easier in spirit than in reality. With McKinsey's stark failure rate of 75% in mind, it is foolish for any organisation to charge into the new world with insufficient resource and planning. With public service models already morphing into new forms and a predicted fight for talent, now is the right time to question accepted norms and bypass outdated procedures. Today's emerging workforce has grown up amidst technological, political and financial global disruption; tomorrow's change agents and community shapers will demand more fitting differentiators before they commit. Future readiness should become the pioneering organisation's clarion call.



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