

Putting the 'I' into 'team'

Jody Goldsworthy is championing a new 'leadership norm', with emotional understanding forming a big part of effective team development



There are few leadership challenges akin to those faced by local government; a decade plus of delivering more for less, unprecedented demographic and technological change, collaboration played out within highly politicised environments, and now the looming uncertainty of Brexit.

We believe that local government should re-set a new 'leadership norm'; a shift from hierarchy and heroes to pioneers who foster inclusive leadership styles and promote collaboration and innovation. Much of this is already in evidence. While there is no 'blueprint' on which to model future local government leadership, our research shines a light on the difficulty in creating truly pioneering cultures that stretch across and between organisations; a challenge that OD and leadership investment must address.

It is the group lens – a focus on team effectiveness within and across boundaries – which most interests us in both our recruitment and leadership advisory work. It matters, of course, because we know an individual's 'fit' to their future organisation's culture or team will make or break their success. The best people processes will factor that fit in. We see this most starkly when we support private sector or non-local government leaders making the transition into senior officer posts.

If culture and team fit matter most, it creates a dilemma in traditional recruitment processes which, by nature, are individually focused. Hiring organisations are primarily focused upon finding and matching the best candidate to a role vacancy and most aspects of the assessment process are there to test how the individual matches up to the job requirement.

It's unrealistic – in terms of time and of logistics – to profile everyone in the host team and check

this against the profiles of all potential candidates to ascertain fit. However, investment in tools to elicit stakeholder views of the role at the outset are increasingly used by our clients. Our own stakeholder engagement tool has been developed just for this purpose; to effectively flush out differences of opinion that might derail the panel later. Another means to challenge ourselves as a sector is to incorporate objective criteria into well-used recruitment activities. Fireside chats and formal meetings with politicians and other stakeholders can add additional insight but might be prone to unconscious bias, going on 'gut instinct' or hiring like for like.

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Post placement, a newly hired leader has only a short amount of time to progress beyond the 'congratulations and welcome' stage and make impact in the leadership team they've joined. First impressions count and their ability to plan their onboarding, with or without support, will make a huge difference. So too, their own emotional literacy – and that of their new team members – will contribute to some of the most important drivers of successful organisational change: trust, wellbeing, safety and resilience within the leadership group.

When it comes to top team effectiveness, all sectors could learn a lot from the massive two-year study on team performance, led by Google. It revealed that the highest-performing teams have one thing in common: psychological safety, the

belief that punishment will not be the result of making a mistake.

Psychological safety allows for moderate risk-taking, speaking your mind, creativity, and sticking your neck out without fear of having it cut off – just the types of behaviour that lead to breakthrough ideas about service innovation or a new endeavour. Psychological safety is both fragile and vital to success in the kind of uncertain, interdependent environments of local government and its partners.

Team development, when rightly deployed to deliver progressive outcomes, must be approached from both a personal and interactive angle. On the personal side, which must come first, this means focusing on how our brains function at work by supporting leaders to develop greater self-awareness and emotional regulation techniques around their own behavioural reaction to external factors.

At work, all humans literally process a provocation, big or small, by a boss; competitive co-worker, politician, place-based partner or dismissive subordinate as a life-or-death threat. When our emotions are aroused, the rational part of our brains are less effective. The amygdala, the alarm bell in the brain, ignites the fight-or-flight response, hijacking higher brain centres. This 'act first, think later' brain structure shuts down perspective and analytical reasoning. Quite literally, just when we need it most, we lose our minds. While that fight-or-flight reaction may save us in life-or-death situations, it handicaps the strategic thinking needed in today's workplace.

A leader aware of their own emotional triggers is a great starting point, although the complexity heightens when workplace stimulus is multiplied by the many relationships within a team. We cannot change anyone else's behaviour, as anyone

with small children can attest. We can only alter our own behaviour and responses to elicit different reactions from others.

In place-based leadership development programmes, we start most frequently by investing with the group in a common language to describe leadership and work relationships. This approach is even more critical in virtual or collaborative, multi organisational teams where the base language is almost guaranteed to differ. Once developed, this common language is augmented by exploring team member views of its effectiveness, around criteria such as strategic alignment; clarity of roles and accountabilities, team unity, team member curiosity and agility – and whether the right skills and behaviours are present 'around the table'.

This more sophisticated approach to leadership development, with emotional understanding and management at its core, is not about labelling teams as effective or ineffective, or leaders as one type or another. For individuals, these techniques allow managers to assess and adjust their behavioural impact, while at team level, the effect of improved emotional management can be astonishing.

A team in tune with each members' emotional needs, who collectively create a safe operational environment and, individually, take charge of their personal behaviours is a powerful force for good in any sector. As the nucleus for place and community innovation, a new take on people shaping has to be top of the agenda for local government leadership. ■

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