

Leading and Measuring Improvement in Local Government

This was the theme of a BT/PMPA discussion held at the BT Government Innovation Centre at the end of June. Professor John Wilson, Head of Salford Business School, addressed a group of senior managers from local government, the voluntary sector and the academic world, presenting reflections on the nature of leadership and drawing on a case study provided by his colleague Colin Moore, Chief Executive of Redcar & Cleveland Borough Council. He highlighted

- The findings of Joyce (2004) which indicated that the characteristics of leadership were much the same in the private as the public sectors
- The work of Collins (2006) which suggested a hierarchy of leadership. “Level 5 leadership” was described as that which “builds enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will”.

On the theme of “enduring leadership” he challenged the notion that “turnaround” can be a once-and-for-all process, suggesting instead that organisations, like individual professionals, need “continuous professional development” and need to keep looking for ways to adapt to changing circumstances and stay ahead.

In the discussion that followed four main points emerged:

- The value of good case studies of change and improvement, and the particular contribution of academics in reflecting on case studies and setting them in some context.
- The complex and varied nature of leadership; the recognition that different types of leadership are required in different circumstances and therefore that different leaders might flourish in different circumstances and the challenge, in local government, of leading places rather than just organisations
- The critical importance of stable finances to organisations going through change. The Redcar & Cleveland case study, as so many others, demonstrated that it was only when the finances were stable and the organisation was able to plan, that transformation was possible
- The key role for leaders in motivating people, the need to understand and harness better the motivation of public servants, and the importance of recognition and reputation in attracting and keeping good people. The Comprehensive Performance Assessment, and the future Comprehensive Area Assessment, was considered to militate against this, as it was perceived to take a line-by-line “fault-finding” approach

rather than an organisational development or people-motivating approach.

Each delegate was asked to identify some points they wished to “take away” with them, and some actions they were going to undertake as a result, but, in addition, PMPA and BT, as organisers of the event, were asked to follow up three challenges:

- a) Could the PMPA or BT commission, or work with other organisations in local government to produce, more high quality case studies, academically verified, to support change and improvement in local government?
- b) Could the PMPA or CIPFA challenge the Audit Commission, in the development of the Comprehensive Area Assessment, to focus more on the value of developing organisations and motivating people
- c) Could the PMPA or CIPFA provide an evidence-based challenge to government, as it completes the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR), on the importance of financial stability in delivering transformational change? This was especially important given the rumours that a three-year settlement for local government was no longer going to be announced in December 2007 because of slippage in the CSR timetable.

As the event broke up and the delegates went for coffee, it was clear that this debate, like so many led by the PMPA, will continue in many forms in the weeks and months to come.

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References:

- Collins, J. (2006), *Good to Great and the Social Sectors: A Monograph to accompany “Good to Great”* (Random House Business Books, London)
- Joyce, P. (2004), The role of leadership in the turnaround of a local authority. *Public Money & Management*, 24, 4, pp.235-242.

A PMPA publication “Leading and Measuring Improvement in Local Government” (June 2007), by John Wilson and Colin Moore and considering the issues of leadership, modernization and performance improvement in local government with reference to the case study of Redcar & Cleveland Borough Council, is available by visiting www.pmpa.co.uk