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## **Leading in Partnership: Using a competency approach for public service leaders**

### **Abstract**

This paper reviews the growth in partnership working in public services and the associated demand for new forms of leadership in the public sector which respond to the different and more complex relationships within UK public services. These new demands require public sector managers to develop new skills for managing across organisational boundaries and in environments with multiple social goals and multiple stakeholders. The paper moves onto review the development of a new leadership questionnaire, which aims to help leaders reflect on their own leadership style and how they can strengthen their leadership within these emerging partnership settings.

## The changing environment of public service leadership

Working in partnership is an increasing part of delivering local public services within the UK. It has been suggested that the capacity of partnership working to deliver results is dependent, in part, on good leadership (Alimo-Metcalfe, 2008). The new challenges presented by partnership working, however, require new leadership responses. What these responses look like in practice is not well known amongst people working and leading in partnerships.

In recent years the task of improving outcomes for local communities has increasingly been given to groups of agencies working in partnership. These partnerships are largely strategic partnerships, co-ordinating the actions of separate agencies rather than those which directly deliver services. Many of the most pressing social problems relating to health, crime, education and employment have wide ranging causes and consequences. By working in collaboration, it is envisaged that groups of agencies can achieve outcomes that a single agency could not.

Whereas once this collaboration was something that public services could choose to engage in, it is now an intrinsic part of the role of public services. A duty on public bodies to work collaboratively is enshrined in legislation such as the Crime and Disorder Act (1998) and the Children Act (2004). The delivery of many government initiatives also depends on working in partnership. The eligibility of deprived areas for funding from the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund was contingent upon the establishment of a Local Strategic Partnership (LSP); LSPs also play a key role in the agreement and delivery of Public Service Agreements and Local Area Agreements in many areas of the country; and Children's Trusts are central to delivering the Every Child Matters agenda.

Despite the potential benefits of partnership working, this is not an easy way to work. Partnerships bring together organisations with different objectives, systems and cultures and require that they work in synergy. This is a difficult task and many partnerships struggle to move beyond meeting and sharing information to delivering collective outcomes. A recent evaluation of LSPs (ODPM and Department for Transport, 2006) found that many are not fit for purpose, with strategic leadership capacity identified as a particular issue. The only delivery capability that partnerships have is that of partner agencies, and unless links are made to these, the partnership will remain 'inert'. As many partnerships are unclear about their purpose, or have been 'caught up' in developing internal procedures and processes, the necessary steps towards delivery have not yet been made. The evaluation report states that leadership is an important factor in whether this step is taken, stating that:

*'Leadership is a crucial element in determining the capacity of LSPs, but the exercise of leadership within strategic partnerships remains extremely challenging...'*

This is also likely to be true of the many other types of partnership currently operating. In our work at OPM with clients, we have found that leaders are struggling to respond to this changing style of working. This adjustment of styles is required right across the public sector from elected members and officers in local government, to health service managers, those working in criminal justice as well as government agencies such as the LSC & DWP. All face the challenges of engaging with each other through Local Strategic Partnerships, of negotiating Local Area Agreements and of working collaboratively to deliver on cross cutting policy themes.

## **What does leadership in a partnership need to achieve?**

Delivering outcomes through partnership working is challenging in a number of respects. Leadership within the partnership should help the partnership to overcome some of these challenges.

### ***(i) Establishing shared objectives***

One of the first tasks of partnership working is to establish what the purpose of the partnership is. A participant in one research study commented that there is:

*'no [single] common objective, instead a set of conflicting ideas about the purpose of public service and what constitutes the public interest'*

(quoted in Chesterman and Horne, 2002).

One of the key leadership roles within a partnership is therefore to engage with partners to negotiate a set of shared objectives for the partnership. This requires leadership behaviours that are inclusive and deliberative, in order to negotiate solutions with, rather than impose them on, the diverse partners involved.

### ***(ii) Constructing the capacity to act***

Partnerships form an intersection between a number of different organisations. The partnership as an entity cannot achieve outcomes directly but must act through the various partner agencies. Goss (2005) therefore notes that 'a key leadership role is often that of constructing both the authority and power to act; and of connecting partnership decisions to the delivery capability of partner agencies. A partnership remains *'inert'* – unable to command or deploy resources, unless these linkages are made.' Effective leadership therefore does not just involve acting within the partnership context, but also understanding the relationship of partner organisations to the partnership and to each other, and using this understanding to 'unlock' resources and capacity in partner organisations.

## **Who provides this leadership?**

It might be expected that the Chair of a partnership should provide the leadership role. Research in Local Strategic Partnerships showed that most often, local authority representatives were given the

role of Chair. However it was commented that *'the real leadership [was exercised elsewhere]* (Goss, 2005).

Indeed, it is likely that no single person will lead at all times in a partnership, but that all partners will provide leadership at different times. Leadership can therefore be conceived of as a capacity of the 'system' as a whole (Chesterman & Horne, 2002). Leadership systems have a number of sources of leadership, residing within different individuals and organisations. It has been argued that leadership systems are more able to work in uncertainty as thinking, learning and responding are distributed throughout the system (Goss, 2005). Successful partnership working may depend on adopting this more adaptable, distributed leadership system. The behaviour of leaders within a leadership system differs from those providing more traditional kinds of leadership, and will focus to a greater extent on understanding and 'holding' complex situations (Goss, 2005).

### **Exploring the skills and behaviours needed to lead in a partnership: A competency framework**

The emerging evidence, and our experience at OPM of working with public sector clients, suggests that leadership in partnerships requires a set of skills and behaviours that individuals may not necessarily have gained from experiences of leading in a single organisation. This provided the impetus for us to research the competencies involved in effective leadership in partnerships. The aim was to arrive at a competency framework that public sector professionals could use prior to working in partnership, as an indication of the skills and behaviours needed; and as a tool for evaluating leadership within their partnership.

An important principle of the project was also that the experts on effective leadership in partnerships are the people who have worked in them. We conducted repertory grid interviews with a sample of people experienced in partnership working in a range of settings. The interviewees had experience of working in local government (officers and members), the health sector and the community safety sector and a range of partnerships including Local Strategic Partnerships, Children's Partnership Trusts, Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships and Economic Regeneration Partnerships.

The repertory grid technique is based on Kelly's (1955) theory of Personal Construct Psychology (PCP). PCP suggests that individuals understand the world in terms of a unique set of bipolar 'constructs' for example 'friendly – unfriendly' or 'talkative-quiet'. The technique seeks to uncover the constructs in play when discussing a particular topic – for example 'leadership'. Constructs are elicited by getting participants to think about specific exemplars.

By basing the interviews around specific exemplars, we hoped to circumvent 'expectancy effects' and prevent interviewees basing their responses on 'received wisdom' about what makes a good leader. For the reasons identified above, notions of traditional leadership may be less applicable in the partnership setting. However, it is these more traditional models of leadership which can come more easily to mind when managers are asked 'What makes a good leader?'

The repertory grid technique enabled us to explore in depth the behaviours associated with effective leadership in partnerships. These behaviours have been organised into a competency framework, detailing partnership leadership competencies in four areas:

- Focus on purpose
- Managing self
- Working with others
- Getting the best out of multi-organisational working.

### **Partnership Leadership Competencies**

The research suggested that leaders in these new environments needed a clear sense of purpose. This purpose however needed to go beyond the boundaries and responsibilities of their own organisation and was more related to the emerging concept of place shaping and included a focus on outcomes rather than organisational processes or objectives.

A second element identified was the ability of public service leaders operating in these emerging environments to manage themselves. This cluster has parallels with the work on emotional intelligence (Caruso & Salovey, 2004). It also suggests that to be most effective in partnerships leaders need to be open about what they hope to get out of the partnership and what they can put in to it, as well as holding the ability to adapt their behaviour to changing demands and roles.

The third element is the ability of leaders to work effectively with others, having the skills in understanding others. This may be through reading body language and cues, as well as the ability to develop trusting relationships where challenge and co-operation are both valued and appreciated.

The fourth element was the ability to understand organisations. This competency extended beyond the boundaries of their own organisation, to the multiplicity of agencies and partners which the leader works with. The research also identified the need for public service leaders to see partnerships as valuable and partners as allies in the addressing the challenges which they faced.

These elements are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1: Competency areas**

**Focus on purpose**

Partnerships need a clear and compelling that is shared by all partners. An effective leader will help to negotiate this vision, and ensure that it is rooted in outcomes for the community. They will ensure that partners use the partnerships as a means to achieve these outcomes, rather than getting caught up in the 'means' themselves.

**Managing self**

The input that a partnership needs from a leader will change over time and in different situations. An effective leader is aware of the different kinds of contribution they can make in the partnership and is able to judge situations to choose what contribution would be the most useful. Partnership working can be made difficult when it is felt that people have 'hidden agendas'. An effective leader will be open about what they hope to get out of the partnership and what they can put in to it, and will act in a way that is in line with the values of the partnership.

**Working with others**

People working in partnership come from a range of professional backgrounds and have different perspectives, which cannot always be easily reconciled. Effective leaders take time to get to know others and what they want to get out of the partnership. During partnership meetings they use cues like body language to 'read' the situation and make sure their contributions are made at the right time and in the right way. They are comfortable with disagreement and debate in the group, and are also able to challenge others' opinions in a calm and helpful way.

**Understanding organisations**

The thinking behind working in partnership is that networks of organizations have the potential to deliver outcomes that a single organisation cannot. Rather than seeing partnership working as a 'necessary evil', effective leaders are enthusiastic about this potential and will speak positively about it to people in the partnership and in their own organizations. They take the work of the partnership seriously, and are willing for their own success to be judged by how well the partnership is doing.

## Summary

In this paper we have set out briefly the emerging nature of leadership in UK public services and identified the need for a new set of competencies which we believe are needed for effective leaders.

For those interested in testing out their own leadership in partnership competencies, the questionnaire is available free on-line for public services managers in the UK. It can be accessed at <https://services.opm.co.uk/lip/home.aspx>



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## Notes

1. A copy of the questionnaire is available to use for free at [www.opm.co.uk/](http://www.opm.co.uk/) But feedback will only be provided to UK public sector managers.
2. OPM is a not for profit employee owned company which specialises in providing advice, consulting and leadership to public service organisations.