

# Public service leadership: Rethinking leadership for collaborative settings



## Introduction

Leadership is crucial to the development and delivery of effective public services. It is essential then that public service reform is underpinned by high quality leadership. Furthermore, reform must also build further leadership capacity.

This briefing paper draws on and develops themes from a more extensive What Works Scotland review of public service leadership (Chapman, van Amersfoort and Watson, 2017). It focuses on the above core issues, organised around three key questions associated with public service leadership:

1. Why do we need to rethink leadership practice?
2. Leadership in collaborative settings: What works?
3. Where next for public service leadership in Scotland?

### 1. Why do we need to rethink leadership practice?

As pressure increases on public services to deliver improved performance within a context of fewer resources, the requirement to achieve more with less means that we must find new ways of working that create new efficiencies and synergies not found in traditional practices.

Furthermore, broader socio-political pressures are likely to lead to the continued restructuring and integration of public services into flatter organisations governed by stronger lateral, rather than vertical relationships, working as mutualistic rather than bureaucratic organisations that move beyond traditional notions of producer-capture - the tendency for any organisation to start operating in the interests of those who work for it. (Hood, 1998). These organisations will operate with more collaborative egalitarian cultures that move beyond traditional hierarchical cultures of the past (Douglas, 1982). These emerging settings will require new forms of leadership. Leaders will be required to forge new relationships, and adopt new roles and responsibilities across institutional and professional boundaries to a level never seen before. These emergent collaborative contexts will require an alternative form of leadership because:

- hierarchical leader-follower relationships are less common; collaborating partners are often assumed to be equal,
- formal positions have less impact on the enactment of leadership in partnerships, and
- there is greater complexity of leadership roles within collaborative settings which combine different cultures and professional identities.

Put simply, the leadership that has served us in the past is unfit to serve us for the future. We need to reimagine leadership practices to build public services that are fit for the future rather than replicate those that served us in the twentieth century.

## 2. Leadership in collaborative settings: What works?

If we are to build leadership practices fit for the future, authentic collaboration and collaborative practice must be placed at the centre of what we do. This means more than talking about collaboration and holding meetings to discuss collaboration. We can think about making this transformation as moving from ‘professional collaboration’ to creating a culture where ‘collaborative professionalism’ prevails. Where we see collaborative professionalism in action all take responsibility for working collectively rather than charging others to do it (see Table 1) (Hargreaves, A. & O’Conner, 2018).

From professional collaboration...	to collaborative professionalism
Talking or action	<i>Talk and action</i>
Narrow achievement goals	<i>Learning with meaning and purpose</i>
Episodic meetings	<i>Embedded cultures</i>
Administratively imposed	<i>Practitioner led</i>
Comfortable and contrived	<i>Genuine and respectful</i>
Conversation	<i>Dialogue</i>
For consumers	<i>With consumers</i>

**Table 1: From professional collaboration to collaborative professionalism**

Whilst there is no recipe for developing collaborative professionalism, the research evidence highlights the importance of treating leadership in collaborative settings as a predominantly social process that focuses on eight key areas:

1. **Building trust with and between members** - working selflessly to create a culture of openness and trust between colleagues.
2. **Maintaining and developing strong relationships** - deliberately building, reinforcing and sustaining high quality relationships.
3. **Facilitating collaboration and equality between members** - paying attention to, and promoting, equitable practices to optimise involvement.
4. **Stimulating the flow of information between members** - actively supporting effective communication to reinforce positive relationships and effective interactions.
5. **Understanding the environment** - recognising the importance of context, the level of capability and capacity within the collaborating organisation(s).
6. **Identifying opportunities, resources and potential stakeholders** - promoting an entrepreneurial and risk-taking culture, being outward-looking and optimistic.
7. **Mobilising people and resources for the greater good** - involving and empowering people to take on new roles and responsibilities to build personal and organisational capacity.
8. **Taking a pragmatic stance** - recognising there are times when a directive approach must take precedence over the spirit of collaboration, without losing the support of a guiding coalition in order to drive the collaborative agenda forward.

The eight areas of focus are interdependent and influence each other. For example, as trust develops, relationships are likely to be strengthened which, in turn, may lead to more opportunities for involvement and the potential for people to take on additional leadership roles which, in turn, may build organisational capacity. Conversely, a decline in trust in one area of collaboration is likely to have a detrimental effect on

other areas. However, there are cases where one partner stepping back slightly from an area of involvement – taking a pragmatic stance – may actually have a positive effect in another area and help to maintain and develop strong relationships. The key to leadership in collaborative settings appears to be finding the appropriate blend between the supporting and directive actions that make things happen in collaboration.

Successful leaders are entrepreneurial and build ‘relationship capital’. They are entrepreneurial in the sense that they have the capability to see opportunities for collaboration and the mobilisation of resources including other people and can link these to intended outcomes. These leaders build ‘relationship capital’ by drawing on, developing and sustaining relationships with key individuals. Strong and trusting relationships are necessary to sustain commitment through challenging periods and often serve as the glue that holds partnerships and collaborative endeavour together when things are working less smoothly. These relationships are particularly important for inter-organisational and cross service collaborations that may suffer from conflicting values, governance arrangements, interests or perspectives.

These interpersonal networks are the foundation beneath formal inter-organisational or service partnerships. Trust enables people to deal with the risk and uncertainty that is often involved in collaboration, and while trust will develop over time a basic level of trust is needed at the start of any collaborative initiative. Reticulists (Sullivan and Skeltcher, 2002) are individuals who span boundaries to build capacity and influence the practice of collaboration. These actors are:

- **Skilled communicators** - with the ability to adapt their language to specific settings and empathise with others through negotiation and seeing a situation from a range of perspectives.
- **Excellent networkers** - gain access to a range of settings, seek out and connect others with common interests and goals.
- **Strategic in orientation** - they can see the ‘big picture’ and understand how different partners can contribute to achieve common goals.
- **Contextually astute** - they understand how opportunities and constraints within the organisation can influence individual’s behaviour.
- **Problem-solvers** - they think laterally and creatively to seek solutions to the challenges they face.
- **Self-managing** - they take risks within a framework that understands organisational capacity. In this sense they have sound organisational skills.

The importance of reticulists has also been emphasised by others who have suggested that leadership in collaborative settings is characterised by working across structural and emotional boundaries, a phenomenon that has also been addressed as boundary spanning, boundary crossing and brokering (Broussine & Miller, 2005; Morse, 2010; Silvia & McGuire, 2010);. Similarly to reticulists, boundary crossers have the ability to build strong and trusting relationships, negotiate between other actors, connect problems to solutions and mobilise resources and efforts (Silvia & McGuire, 2010).

### 3. Where next for public service leadership in Scotland?

We have outlined the case for rethinking the nature of public service leadership in Scotland. We argue this new form of leadership must go beyond the necessary, but increasingly less important, system management approaches. This new leadership must evolve ‘hand in glove’ with the development of flatter, more collaborative, networked, mutualistic public service organisations.

For mutualistic public service organisations to lead the change rather than rely on national prescription to deliver change we need to develop leaders with the credibility, capacity and expertise to lead local and national system change across a range of services. They will have to do this whilst sustaining their own

team/department/organisation or service and engaging authentically with the communities they serve. This is a future where partnerships, networks and federations working laterally with shared, coordinated and distributed leadership across many types of boundaries will provide both the delivery of services *and* the challenge and support for improvement of services. It will include the development of sustainable, environmentally sound, and socially just practices, and capacity-building through professional learning and leadership development.

Put simply, in the future those working in public services will frame and lead provision of their services, and set the direction for, and support, service improvement in partnership with those engaging with the service. Co-production with service users will become the norm. Not only will this involve moving decision-making much closer to the point of delivery, it will also move beyond public service producer-capture and ultimately operationalise Christie.

See the accompanying What Works Scotland policy briefing - *Public service leadership: What works* - to get a summary of our key findings from our leadership research. It presents a set of highlights which we believe should inform thinking and future developments in public service leadership across Scotland.

See all What Works Scotland leadership resources at [whatworksscotland.ac.uk/category/topic/leadership](http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/category/topic/leadership)

## References

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This policy briefing was written by **Professor Christopher Chapman**, Co-director of What Works Scotland (University of Glasgow).

**What Works Scotland** is a Scottish Government and ESRC-funded research collaboration aiming to improve the way local areas use evidence to make decisions about public service development and reform.