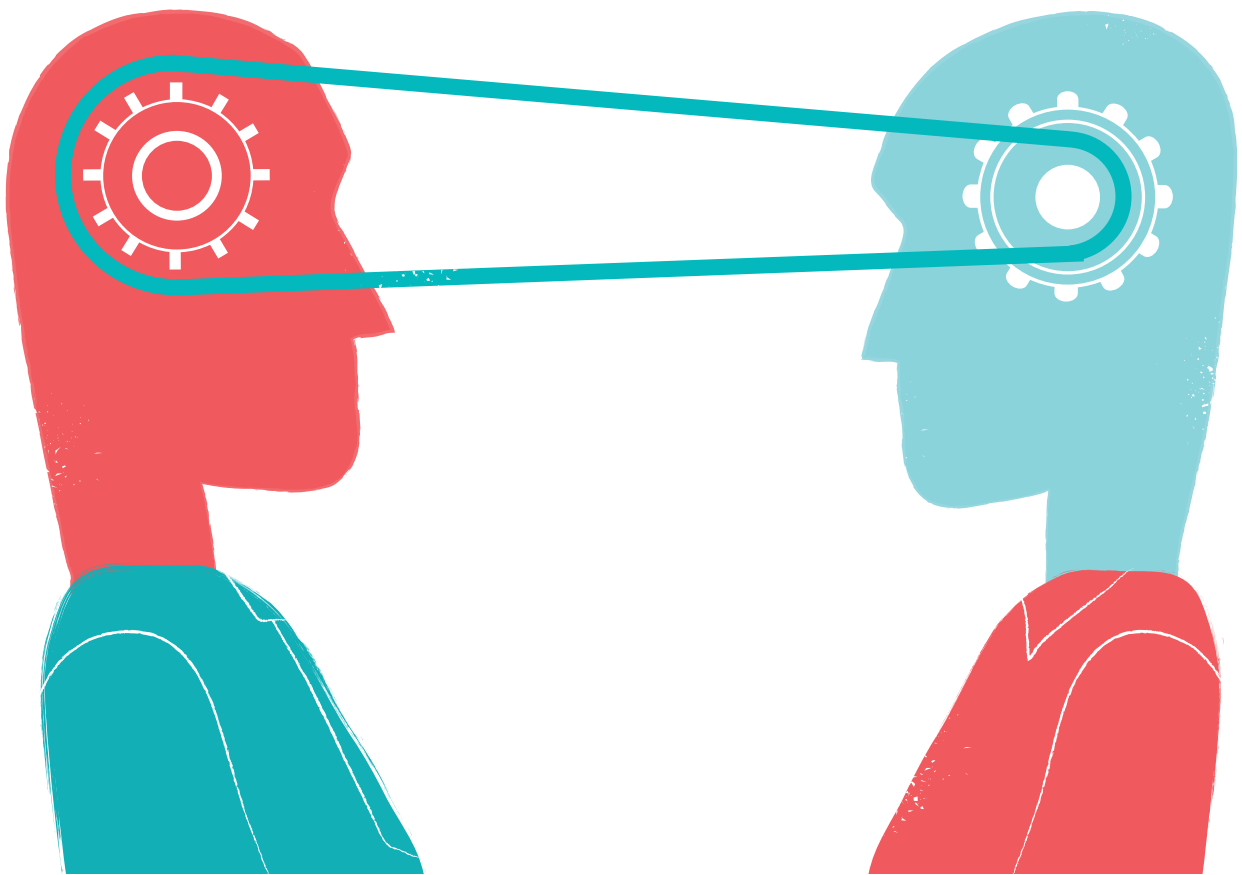


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LEADERS WHO COLLABORATE COLLABORATORS WHO LEAD

ROUNDTABLE WRITE-UP

EMMA BURNELL AND KATHINKA LYCHE

CONTEXT

In spring of 2016, NLGN and Veredus held two discussion events on the theme of collaborative leadership. The participants were council chief executives: the first event representing some northern local authorities and the second, London boroughs.

Central government's view of what local government is for and what it does is changing. Under New Labour, local government was seen as a mechanism for identifying and dealing with need through managed public services. For the coalition and now the Conservatives, local government is mainly about developing and managing local economic growth.

London will not have formal deals or combined authorities, so leaders and chief executives have to look in many directions at once. Their northern counterparts are able – once an agreed deal is in place – to define their political geography and direct their attention in a much more concentrated way.

Outside of London, the crux of all collaboration and the ethos flowing through all such conversations is the pursuit of growth for their areas. London has largely achieved growth, but is struggling to cope with both the fallout of accelerated growth and ensuring that all their citizens are able to benefit from it.

As a result of this, these conversations on collaborative leadership took place in very different contexts. As is so often true in local government, the skills required from local people will differ from place to place. This is one of the reasons that devolution is vital. Far from creating postcode lotteries, it allows places to attract the different kinds of skills needed to address their local needs.

Different geographies – political and physical – encourage different kinds of behaviours. A solution that works in a compact geography like Greater Manchester may not be suitable for the urban sprawl of London or for a mixed geography such as places like West Yorkshire or Essex.

And we should not allow form to be the be-all and end-all of function. All places have existing and overlapping political, economic and health geographies and it is how they bring these together that will determine if their places are best able to take advantage of the opportunities devolution is offering.

The framework of Whitehall is still largely antithetical to collaboration at the centre. The Department for Work and Pensions working with the Department of Health, or the Department for the Environment collaborating with the Department for Education is largely down to individual relationships, particularly at cabinet and ministerial level. Collaboration is not encouraged corporately, nor are institutions incentivised to change or collaborate. In fact

the culture actively discourages it through competition over budgets and priorities.

There needs to be a sense that this way of working can be broken down even while the rules exist to keep it in place. The culture at Whitehall does not engender this, but it may be considerably easier away from these structures. If localities can break down their own siloes, they may be able to give their leaders the freedom to act more innovatively, breaking down old patterns of leadership to create new ways of working with places and people.

There can be no set blueprint for how this is done. London's boroughs have very different identities and do not always recognise their interdependence for example. But it is when they work together on mutually beneficial programmes that they can gain from collaboration. Equally, a large county may not need to work with its neighbours, but will certainly need to collaborate more and more with its districts, other providers of local public services and key stakeholders in the local economy.

However, despite these clear differences there were some key areas of agreement for what collaborative leadership is and why it is needed. This paper explores the themes of this discussion and makes three key recommendations about how to achieve better leadership outcomes for local government.

RECOMMENDATION ONE: RECOGNISE, ACCEPT AND EMBRACE THE DIFFERENCE IN “WINS”

Our sense of what leadership constitutes is changing. Gone are the days of macho “my way or the highway” leaders expected to take charge and win at the expense of their neighbours, colleagues and friends. Nowadays, we need leaders who can collaborate and collaborators who can lead. These are different skills, but in the new landscape both are vital. Collaboration cannot be considered an add-on to use as and when necessary but an ethos central to how leadership is seen and delivered.

It is clear that chief executives believe they will stand or fall depending on the deals they make and their success in implementing them. Local government is getting smaller in workforce but growing rapidly in what it is expected to deliver. Relationships are taking a central role in how delivery is achieved and what we view of as leadership qualities has to change too to recognise and respond to this.

Key to collaboration is an understanding that you can't always be in charge. A really good collaborator will give up power in order to get a better deal for the whole. But they must be able to do so in a way that protects and works for their place and is about

collaboration not domination. If you are the leader of a place that isn't dominant, then you must demonstrate what collaborating with other places does for your area and the people you serve. Equally, you must show what you and your place are bringing to the partnership and develop an understanding of mutual gain. A common view must be reached, not imposed. It must also be able to achieve political and organisational buy-in from all organisations. It must come long before any deal is done. It will be too late to decide to collaborate once the terms of that collaboration are written.

To build places that work collaboratively there needs to be recognition that each part of that place will not achieve the same deal. Not all will be identikit winners, though all must share in the rewards of success to make it feasible in the first place. The real test of collaborative leadership is the ability to reach a settlement that develops the strengths of different partners while working for the place as a whole.

In areas with a relatively compact geography like Greater Manchester, this may mean in the beginning a focus on developing the most economically successful parts of the region and developing infrastructure and transport links to enable all citizens to benefit from the increased opportunities available. By doing so locally and on a smaller scale we can avoid the greater inequalities we currently see with the north south divide by

ensuring that smaller suburbs both have a greater say in how this works within their local deals and also that they then move forward from a phase based around hard infrastructure to a phase based around developing growth in non-traditional ways that spreads not just to where opportunities are available to travel to, but changes where they happen in the first place.

One way in which combined authority leaders can collaborate to make whole places a success may be to invest in public infrastructure in areas where there is less commercial or industrial activity. This will allow for different types of investment across a place as a whole that should lead to successful outcomes for the whole place.

Making places work as a coherent whole is about developing settlements that recognise the different needs of different parts of a place and not about trying – even within a combined authority area – to adopt a one size fits all approach. Successful places then help not just themselves, but their neighbours too to grow recognising the mutual benefits of doing so.

It will be by collaborating to achieve outcomes across a whole place that local government can prove this is possible and desirable. By supporting localities according to their differing local needs combined authority leaders can demonstrate an understanding of how collaborative leadership is about

celebrating difference while supporting joint outcomes. It is only by doing so that the place as a whole can be stronger and more successful collectively and for the individuals who live and work there.

RECOMMENDATION TWO: COLLABORATE EARLY AND CONTINUOUSLY

The Government has been clear that they do not want to set a blueprint as to what they envisage for local leadership under devolution other than the need for democratic accountability to sit with a directly elected mayor. It will be up to local leaders to define this for themselves and prove to Government that it works. Indeed, the independence being offered through greater devolution is forcing councils to recognise their greater interdependence both between authorities and with wider sectoral partners such as the local NHS, LEPs and their private sector supply chain.

This creates considerable complexity and forces difficult conversations based on the overall needs of a place rather than organisational silos. This transition is naturally difficult and requires strong leadership, and a different type of leadership, based on collaboration.

It is not just in leadership positions where this is vital. It must happen at all levels where places and services work together. There can be a tendency in organisations to value how we do things as much as what we do. This needs to be challenged as it can prevent innovation by limiting the space available at all levels. The hidden secret of local government is that capacity is even scarcer than money. If we continue to cut off to innovation by reducing the capacity of all actors at all levels, we will not achieve the desired outcomes.

London leadership tends to be very involved in each other's recruitment which means they are able to reward and seek out collaborative tendencies. This means you have a cohort of chief executives who have a stake in each other's success and a willingness to work together to achieve it. We need to look at how this can be formalised to continue to improve the ability to bring through collaborative leaders.

Elsewhere, devolution is moving at pace, and as such it is hard to keep up. But collaboration can't be enforced immediately by circumstances. It is a long process of earning and building mutual trust which can only come over time. It is vital that leaders are collaborating long before they approach formal deal status. It is only by doing so that they will be able to make any such deal a success.

RECOMMENDATION THREE: LOCAL GOVERNMENT SHOULD WORK AS A SECTOR TO CREATE COLLABORATIVE COHORTS.

Collaborative leadership is often a fluke, occurring spontaneously when the right people happen to come together at the right time. This makes it difficult to mandate or replicate. Collaborative leadership is a function of getting the right people together and creating an environment in which they are able to work collaboratively. Local government needs to promote collaboration across its ranks in the broadest sense to grow and retain cohorts of individuals throughout the wider sector understanding that it benefits us all to do so.

The rising generations of 'digital natives' are a valuable pool of talent that local government may wish to engage in this way. Millennials have been raised in a hyper-interactive world of collaborative online platforms and social media, and their entry into employment is introducing an entirely new set of social behaviours into the workplace. This includes an instinctive proclivity towards collaboration and innovation. Younger generations tend to be at least initially driven by a desire to make a difference in the world, making them excellent candidates for recruitment into a dynamic public sector. However, local government in particular is currently failing to recruit the brightest talent, losing out to its

competitors in the private and third sectors. The old deal for local government recruitment has gone and will not return. Where once the wage differential with the private sector was compensated with the stability of long-term job prospects and a good pension, this is no longer a deal that local government employers are either able to give nor one that is attractive for them. A new offer that removes the stigma of formality and inflexibility offering young people the chance to develop a range of talents in flexible jobs must be devised. This must be particularly attractive to younger generations, who are put off by rigid career paths and who may be excited by the breadth and range of options available to them across the local government spectrum. However, it can also attract wider local government talent who started working in councils but now find themselves in private sector suppliers, consultancies or other public sector bodies.

In order to tap into this vital resource, local government must embrace the ongoing reinvention of public service careers. Retooling schemes like the National Graduate Development Programme (NGDP) to act as an umbrella across the wider sector, rather than just within individual organisations and aspects of the sector, could be one way of doing this. Cohorts on the NGDP currently act as informal action learning sets, but this could be better captured more formally, ensuring these groups continue to support each other and the wider sector as their careers develop. This would mean

broadening the traditionally linear path of local government career progression to allow for greater cross-fertilisation and fluidity with other partner sectors and organisations. We need to ensure talent is nurtured as early as possible developing their leadership and collaborative skills at the earliest opportunity. Putting people in leadership roles early is not without risk. But by ensuring we develop supportive cohorts and a culture that accepts the challenges of collaborative leadership, this has the potential to break the old and outdated mould of leadership.

While local government career progression will need to become multi-sectoral in the future, it is crucial to simultaneously provide an environment that is conducive to retaining engagement with future leaders in a variety of ways and ensuring they continue to work within the wider sector, returning to leadership positions throughout their careers. Those who leave the formal sector for partnership organisations must still be seen as commonwealth assets and developed through careers throughout local government. However, this must happen organically in a way that is attractive to those who seek these more fluid careers. A system that is too oppressive might squash their potential for learning and development across a range of roles.

For the first time in history, five generations will soon be working together under the same (at least virtual) roof. In this new, multi-generational workplace, tensions are likely

to emerge around the increasingly divergent range of wants and needs of different generations. In order to attract the emerging cohort of bright millennials, space must be carved out within the sector to cater to different sets of behaviours, expectations and aspirations. Talent must not only be recruited, but celebrated, promoted and allowed to shine once it is found. This will necessitate a reworking of the current reward systems, work cultures, and career paths, and a broader understanding of where and how they can develop the best experience and tools for future leadership.

Current rigid approaches to HR are ripe for disruption, and whatever takes its place must regard talent as more of a collective good to be shared between institutions and industries. There may even be a case for deliberately over-promoting talented individuals with the right qualities to ensure they grow into leadership rather than have old model of leadership trained into them. Those who have not yet learned what they do and don't have "permission" to do are better able to learn to take risks and reap the rewards of doing so.

Instead of different authorities competing for the best talent in a small pool, we should look to change the whole recruitment model. Recruiting whole cohorts together into pools of local government talent to be shared across boroughs or places may allow these cohorts to develop these skills together naturally.

CONCLUSION

As different types of devolution take hold across the country, we will see a mosaic of different systems and the different leaderships they require. But all must be able to be held accountable locally. The lens of democracy must continue to serve the public interest even as we change the nature of what local governance is. This outlook is entirely predicated on a new relationship between the citizen and the state. Local people will be asked to do more and an essential collaboration is between the citizen and their local authority. This is where the deal is truly changing. We need to invest far more in an understanding of what this means and how to ensure that it has the democratic buy-in necessary to make it a success.

Collaborative leadership is incredibly hard. A chief executive stands or falls with the deal they make for their place, but their success is now entirely predicated on the success of a wider area and a network of deals to deliver it. Collaboration cannot be seen as an add-on but core to what it means to be a successful chief executive.

All devolution looks different as do all collaborations. They will be shaped by the personalities and partnerships they contain. There can be no set way of devolving or sharing power, as it is vital that the “what” is organised on a local level.

However, we believe that following these basic recommendations will allow local authorities to have a better understanding of how to build towards full collaboration. As one participant argued “Collaboration isn’t everything. But we haven’t got it right yet”. We hope that by offering these starting points we can help local authorities to reshape their futures in a collaborative direction.

THE VIEW FROM VEREDUS

CARL BROOKS

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Veredus very much recognises the context and the challenges this sets for the sector if it is to plan for the future ‘leadership of place’. We agree that collaborative leadership is crucial to the ability of local public services to enable better outcomes for communities. The complex landscape of public service provision, governance and legislation is brought into sharper focus through devolution.

Successful transformation of services will need ‘system translators’ who enable joining up across institutional boundaries. Whilst the current crop of senior leaders have grown into this new role, austerity and the economy-wide competition for talent have meant that there isn’t a generation of accomplished leaders to follow them.

We also know that social norms and expectations (for example of digital natives and millennials) will mean future leaders will have to have a different frame of reference anyway. We observe that Generations Y and Z seem more comfortable with networks than hierarchies – this could be good for the collaborative landscape, but there is a risk of disenchantment before they have the chance

to be leaders unless the hierarchical nature of local government changes.

Veredus is actively involved in working through these challenges. We spend a lot of time talking to our clients and to the cadre of ‘future leaders’ through our executive search and interim management placement services. We would therefore offer some further observations from these conversations:

- Future talent will be motivated by the values and mission of organisations more so than previous generations and there is an opportunity for local public services to use this to attract future leaders.
- Previous investments in talent have been undermined by leakage of talent out of the public sector (though we would like to have a stronger evidence base for this).
- Movement between public service providers is a good thing because it increases the number of system translators – so a means of developing public service-wide talent would be helpful.
- While London has historically been seen to offer the breadth and depth to be an interesting place to build a career, devolution opens up the opportunity to do this around the country, with a range of service providers who would be interested in harnessing this talent.
- The private sector is as much a part of this as the public sector, given the level of engagement between the two.

We think this gives us all a call to action:

The sector needs to create a means of deploying talent in local public services – perhaps a single talent management scheme that builds on NGDP – to increase the prevalence of system translators. The first step is to co-design with key stakeholders a solution vehicle that could do this perhaps initially across London public services.

Veredus would very much like to be part of this thinking as it progresses.

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