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.

Team development, when rightly deployed to deliver progressive outcomes, must be approached from both a personal and interactive angle

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 provoke, big or small, by a boss; competitive co-worker, politician, place-based partner or an emotional response. 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, 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, 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, hijacking higher brain centres.

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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