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Understanding the political culture and context – a key role for the cultural leader

by Sue Isherwood, NCF Leading Learning Programme director

Over the last few years there has been lots of talk about leadership for the culture and leisure sector and lots of action, particularly for emerging leaders, mainly supported by the Cultural Leadership Programme which sadly came to an end in March this year. However, there is a strong legacy and wherever I go I hear that leadership is still a priority. But as with so many other parts of our ecology, the words are fine, but there's not nearly so much money going where the mouth is! More than ever the sector needs effective advocates and imaginative managers who can deliver 'great art for everyone', but who also understand how to work within the dominant political culture to ensure political buy in and so sustainability.

I have worked in and closely with local government for over fifteen years and am currently running a leadership development programme for senior cultural managers from across the arts, libraries, museums, tourism and leisure sectors. In my discussions with national bodies and meetings with senior cultural managers from all over the UK I observe that little attention is given to understanding where politicians both local and national are coming from, both on cultural leadership programmes and by many of the would be leaders I meet.

We have come to realise that leadership is not just intuitive, but that many aspects can be learned. Over the last twenty years MBA programmes became increasingly important in introducing professional leadership and management theories and processes. They embrace a lot of psychological stuff as well. Daniel Goleman's arguments for the vital contribution that emotional intelligence makes to successful leadership is in every MBA syllabus now. And organisations like the Work Foundation and for our sector Mission Models Money have done research which demonstrates again and again that the best leaders are those with very high levels of people skills.

So there is rightly a lot of emphasis on how to recognise personal strengths and challenges and how to develop the self-awareness that will in turn stimulate staff members to perform most effectively – and happily, of course. Working in partnership with other organisations and their people is also recognised as vital, but there is one area where we seem reluctant to go – politicians are people too and very important ones in terms of securing the future. Understanding how politicians tick, their imperatives and the power relations between them is key to sector

sustainability, not just for those working directly in local and national government, but for all cultural organisations.

Over the past couple of years I have been lucky to work with a number of people steeped in the politician's mind set – and seeing it from their point of view – one that relates to keeping close to the hearts and minds of voters – has been revelatory. I invited Chris White, a district and county councillor and chair of the Local Government Association's Culture and Tourism Group to speak about an average week for him. I wanted my participants to learn something about how politicians spend their time. It was a great way to shift professional perceptions. When we meet politicians' time is usually short and we want to make our case as forcefully as possible, but we are often too close to it. However much they personally believe in the importance of culture to local communities politicians are closer to other consuming passions – the need for a by-election win, potential schisms within the ruling group, the triangulations of power, as well as the personal predilections we all have. How can helping you help him or her? Where is the common cause?

Simon Baddeley of Birmingham University's School of Local Government (Inlogov) developed a model for understanding how politicians operate and how managers react to various styles over twenty years ago now, but it remains relevant today and is a useful starting point for honing insights and skills, although not widely known in cultural circles. Simon has also been videoing interviews with local authority political leaders and chief executives for the same period. As a result of his work we can observe at close hand the subtle play of such relationships. There are huge tensions that arise in the overlap of political and managerial spheres of action and as managers we tend to concentrate on our own sphere – at the cost of missing what will make change stick – the combined dynamic of the political and professional.

The last word here belongs to Martyn Allison, a wily and sophisticated observer and operator in our world and until June 2011 the National Advisor for Culture and Sport with the Local Government Improvement and Development Agency,

"We live in a political world where our elected representatives have to make difficult choices with ever decreasing resources. Good managers and leaders understand the art of political management and can comfortably live in the space between the political and the operational. In fact effective advocacy of our value and worth to communities depends on it."

Further Reading: Simon Baddeley and Kim Jones *Owl, Fox, Donkey or Sheep: Political Skills for Managers* Management Learning 1987

This can be found online at

<http://mlq.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/18/1/3>

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