

Article for Municipal Journal, July 2011

The Leading Learning Programme: Cultural and Sporting Leadership for Local Government

by Sue Isherwood, NCF Leading Learning Programme director

Whenever two or three senior managers are gathered together and the subject is 'human resources' - the people who will take their organisations beyond the next few years - what are they looking for? People who can imagine the future, innovate, manage to get more from less, take staff and politicians with them - in short good leaders.

I've lost count of how many times I have heard government ministers, senior local politicians and eminent thinktankers speak about the importance of good leadership, particularly in troubled times. We all agree that local government is a challenging arena for any leader and at the moment it might be argued that the aspiring leader needs the vision of Nelson Mandela, the canniness of Warren Buffet, the flair of Steve Jobs and the emotional intelligence of Mother Theresa coupled with the perseverance of Sisyphus and the political skills of 'The Prince'.

So where might you find such paragons? Increasingly they need to be home grown. Having stripped out as many costs as possible most authorities already have an issue with previously operationally-focussed managers taking on the more strategic thinking and planning roles. Insuring you have appropriately skilled leadership is a headache.

Local government has supported the development of various generic leadership programmes but the one I direct, the Leading Learning Programme, is specifically aimed at senior managers in the culture, leisure and sports sector. These people manage services which rarely command the big budgets of education and social services, but they do deliver very high profile and politically sensitive services which are highly valued by communities. This sector also attracts people whose education has led them to be creative and innovative thinkers, while their experience is strong on partnership working and developing community-led solutions. So here is an excellent place to find and nurture leaders for the whole of local government.

The Leading Learning Programme has been running successfully for three years, including a pilot year supported by the Cultural Leadership Programme. Since then it has relied on a mixture of bursaries, the support of the professional associations who are members of the National Culture Forum, particularly CLOA (Chief Leisure Officers Association) and participants' fees. The programme offers an initial 360

degree report, followed by three residentials (7 days in all). It is backed up with a one-to-one carefully matched mentoring service and five facilitated action learning sets to strengthen peer learning. A website (www.ncfleadinglearning.co.uk) provides further information, news, application details and course materials for alumni.

We are tracking the 75 people from across England, Scotland and Wales who have taken the programme and so far we have found a majority have taken on increased responsibilities, with 10 internal promotions, a county council area director and a chief executive of a major tourism venue. Our alumni are people authorities and public trusts wish to retain and promote.

A major part of the programme's success has been the strong support given by all the mentors – senior managers recruited through SOLACE – who give their time freely to help the next generation. Then there are the chief executives who have spoken, no holds barred, at our residentials, and the Local Government Group whose Culture and Tourism Panel provide speakers and whose Improvement and Development wing (IDeA as was) has allowed us to include Martyn Allison, National Adviser for Culture and Sport, in our residential team.

The Chief Executives have been impressed by what they've seen and experienced.

Derrick Anderson, Chief Executive of Lambeth says, I have contributed to two Leading Learning programmes over the last couple of years. I have found the participants eager to grasp at the wisdoms of decades of field Leadership. They have also been keen to both distinguish for themselves and to differentiate between good management and great Leadership. I would recommend the programme to anyone considering a senior role in the cultural arena and beyond.

And Christine Fisher, Chief Executive of NW Leicestershire is equally supportive. As a mentor for the programme, over the past three years, I have been incredibly impressed with the quality of the learning approach and the calibre of the participants over a wonderful breadth of the leisure and cultural sector. I am impressed with how much is offered within the programme for such a low cost. During the "challenges" ahead within our sector, investing in our current talent is essentially the right thing to do and the National Culture Forum has an excellent track record in delivering a programme which is highly valued by all involved."

And indeed the participants themselves are warmly appreciative
I really did think it was excellent – exactly what I was looking for from a course.

It has developed my skills and confidence as a leader. The mentoring was both practical and inspirational giving me an opportunity to develop strategies to tackle challenging problems and put them into practice.

I have been able to lead my team effectively through a period of great change.

I challenge members of my team more. I delegate more. I have started to build much stronger relationships with directors and elected members.

I am more emotionally intelligent and believe this has helped me get better results from myself, my direct reports, my manager and my partners.

I am more politically aware and confident in dealing with difficult matters and advising my team on how we address issues.

The Leading Learning Programme is recruiting again now for a Dec 2011 start date and will run through 2012. We have developed an excellent and cost effective product which we are confident will continue to answer need. Training budgets are often the first to go and as staff numbers reduce many feel that they cannot ask for developmental support, but investment in the people authorities do retain is money well spent. Our aim is to nurture a new generation of local government leaders who may well emulate the exemplars mentioned above. We aim high and so do our alumni.

For more information about the Leading Learning Programme contact

Sue Isherwood, Director

leadership@cloa.org.uk

Tel 01749 871110/07919 540803