Common Purpose has been running Cross-Boundary Leadership programmes in the North of England for almost thirty years: for students, emerging leaders and senior leaders. Our very first programme was in Newcastle and in 2018 we delivered programmes for nearly 800 leaders in the North. This is in addition to our work in over 100 cities worldwide.

In summer 2018, we did some research to find out what leaders in the North were thinking about leadership. We believed that we could reach a diverse group of leaders from a range of backgrounds and perspectives who would be willing to share their insights — and we did. Over 400 people completed our survey: students as well as leaders in the private, public and not-for-profit sectors. We asked them about their networks and how diverse they were; about what was important to them in leadership in the North; and how this was reflected in reality. We also wanted to know how good leadership manifested itself in the North and how their own leadership was contributing to the success of the North.

In the comments sections, perhaps not surprisingly, words and phrases like networks, partnerships and collaboration recurred. There was a real sense that good leadership manifests itself in all sorts of people and places and not just in those right at the top of our big organizations. Many commented on the proactive contribution of themselves and others to their cities, in both their professional lives and in their commitment to non-executive and voluntary roles including mentoring others. Another theme was a commitment to investing in the future, in the next generation, in our young people.

However, what was also evident from the quantitative data were some skills and connectivity gaps where the reality did not always match aspirations. Respondents told us that they wanted leaders who were visionary, collaborative and inclusive but that didn’t always manifest itself. We are keen to talk to anyone with an interest in this — email me directly at marie.mohan@commonpurpose.org.uk or post your comments on social media using #NorthernLeaders

Marie Mohan
CEO, Common Purpose UK
The need for collaboration

94% of respondents said that it was important for leaders in the North to be collaborative, but only a third believed that leaders in the North demonstrated this quality. Given the increasing complexity of the problems and challenges that we face, there is a greater need for collaboration with other sectors and specializations, at a regional, national and global level.

The need for inclusivity

87% thought the North needed leaders who were inclusive but only 27% believed that leaders in the North were actually inclusive – the most significant disparity between what people wanted to see and what they saw in reality.

Networks within cities are strong, but regional and global networks could be stronger

While 61% of respondents said their networks within their own cities were strong, 57% thought their networks across the world were very weak. Even those in the private sector were pessimistic about their global networks, with only 16% saying that they were strong.

Networks in the North are diverse in some ways but not in others

Across the private, public and not-for-profit sectors, networks were most diverse in terms of sectors, but less diverse in terms of geographies and beliefs.

Leaders in the North are resilient

The majority of respondents thought that leaders in the North demonstrated resilience, with many highlighting the response to the Manchester Arena attack in 2017 as a shining example of this resilience.

The North needs visionary leaders

The need for visionary leadership was expressed across all sectors, with 92% of those in the not-for-profit sector ranking it as very important for the North.
We asked leaders living and working in the North of England what they thought about leadership there and what they believed was most important for the future of the North. In total, we received over 400 responses from a range of leaders across the private, public and not-for-profit sectors. These were leaders at all levels, who are invested in or actively shaping the future of the North.

“Values-based leadership, pragmatic decision-making and taking ownership to realize collective outcomes are essential traits of the most effective leaders in the North, no matter their sector or background. Fundamentally they have to ‘care’ and be people who get things done effectively, economically, at pace.”

Dr. Claire Handby, Director, Deloitte LLP
How strong are your networks?

Leadership is not just about leading within your own spheres of authority, but also about leading beyond authority and operating outside silos. Connections are an important part of leadership, and the strength of respondents’ networks within and beyond their cities is an indicator of this ability.

We asked people to tell us how strong they thought their networks were on a scale of 0 to 5, with 5 being very strong. Responses of 4 and upwards were classified as ‘strong’ or ‘very strong’ and are mapped below.

“It is our role to bring those across the North together to drive our ambitions, to be even greater in the future than we are today.”
Henri Murison, Director, Northern Powerhouse Partnership

Across all sectors, we found that networks were strongest within respondents’ own cities and weakest globally. 61% said that their networks were very strong in their city, but less than 30% thought they had strong networks across the North of England. The strength of networks across the UK varied between sectors.

Those in the private sector were most confident about the strength of their networks overall, as compared to the public and not-for-profit sectors. A third of respondents from the private sector thought their networks across the North of England were strong, compared to just 21% from the not-for-profit sector.

Interestingly, fewer people in the private sector thought their networks were strong within their own cities than those in the public and not-for-profit sectors. The not-for-profit sector had stronger networks within their own cities than the public sector, but weaker networks globally.
While the strength of networks is an important consideration, it is just as important to take into account the diversity of these networks. Good leaders cross boundaries – in order to solve complex problems, they have to build networks with people who are different from them.

We asked people to describe the diversity of their networks on a scale of 0 to 5 (with 0 being not diverse at all) in terms of sectors, specializations, geographies, generations, backgrounds and beliefs. Responses of 4 and upwards were classified as ‘diverse’ and ‘very diverse’ and are mapped below.

Across sectors, nearly half believed their networks were very diverse in terms of sectors, while over 40% said their networks were diverse in terms of specializations and backgrounds. Respondents believed their networks to be least diverse in terms of geographies and beliefs.

Between sectors, the picture is somewhat more complex – while more than half in the not-for-profit and private sectors agreed that they were diverse in terms of sectors, the number within the public sector was much lower, at 37%. The private sector was less diverse in terms of beliefs and backgrounds than the not-for-profit sector, but much more diverse in terms of generations.

The public sector as a whole appeared to have less diverse networks than either the not-for-profit or private sector, which presents a challenge, given the need for it to work collaboratively and in partnership with others.
What kind of leaders does the North need, and what does it have?

We were keen to understand what people thought about the future of the North and what they believed the most important leadership qualities for leaders in the North were. In addition to this, we wanted to see whether people thought leaders in the North demonstrated each of those qualities.

The data shows us that people think the North needs leaders who are collaborative, resilient, visionary and inclusive. More than half believed that leaders in the North demonstrated resilience, with many highlighting the response to the Manchester Arena attack in 2017 as an example of this – perhaps unsurprising, given that our survey coincided with the first anniversary of the attack.

However, many thought there was scope for improvement in certain areas of leadership. Although collaboration was considered to be the most important quality for Northern leaders, only a third thought that leaders in the North were collaborative. Similarly, there was a significant gap between how inclusive leaders in the North need to be and how inclusive they actually are.

Global-mindedness did not appear to be a top priority when considering leadership in the North, underlined by the fact that most respondents said their global networks were not very strong.

We asked respondents to tell us what they thought the most important leadership qualities for leaders in the North were (“What kind of leaders does the North need?”). We then asked them whether they thought these qualities were present in Northern leadership (“What kind of leaders does the North have?”). Their responses are mapped below.

While over 85% of respondents felt that the North needs leaders who are collaborative, visionary and inclusive, less than 40% of respondents thought these qualities were present in Northern leadership.
“At all levels in public sector organizations and systems, I see leaders who are curious about what they can learn from others, courageous enough to take managed risks and learn from success and failure, and who are compassionate to themselves, their staff and the people they serve.”
Belinda Weir, Director of Leadership, HSMC University of Birmingham

How and where does good leadership manifest itself in the North?

When we asked people how good leadership manifests in the North, many referred to specific qualities of leadership such as vision, collaboration and charisma. We received a wealth of responses that show how good leadership manifests itself in different places.

“[Through] increased regional collaboration and improved recognition that cities cannot compete in isolation.”
Janet Hemingway, Professor and LSTM Director, Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine

“Personally, I see good leadership most in the Manchester business community (although this is where my roots are). For the most part, it is the most collaborative, friendly and forward thinking group of people I’ve had the pleasure of coming across. When I decided to start a business at 18 years old instead of going to university, they threw their arms open for me and embraced me instantly.”
Duncan McCombe, Founder, Network Young

“Leaders in the North are visionary, compassionate and inclusive. They are willing to share their experiences, and allow us to learn from them.”
Elma Jane Lamba, PhD student, University of Salford
“I’ve been impressed by [the Mayor of Manchester’s] bold vision on the need for Greater Manchester to really push on sustainability and his focus on digitization and decarbonization. It’s a bit more amorphous but I think there’s a sort of shared leadership in the business community in Manchester. Since moving here we’ve been really impressed by the connectivity and the willingness to help, connect, advise and collaborate at all levels.”
Sophie Walker, COO, Disposal

“We are a region with some great leaders who for me display the characteristics associated of being from living, and/or working in Yorkshire – straightforward, uncomplicated, direct, personable. We do good business here, underpinned by the above qualities.”
Nick Howard, Managing Director, Limehouse Films Ltd

“Manchester, especially, has its fair share of excellent leaders, right across the private, public and third sectors. I’ve been especially humbled by the dedication and contribution of bodies like the North West Business Leadership team, which is a collection of the most senior leaders in some of the region’s largest employers, who come together with the sole aim of making the North West the best place to live and do business.”
Sandy Lindsay MBE, Chair, Tangerine & The Juice Academy

“In people and organizations focused on taking society on a journey. Great businesses make headlines, but real leadership is a tide that raises all boats. I think we see leadership in surprising places (eg councils, not-for-profits) and in my experience much of the leadership operates without traditional power. If we could link this leadership to existing power structures, we’d see some spectacular results.”
Todd Hannula, Director & Co-Founder, Shine
Contributing to the success of the North

We found that most people felt they were contributing in some way to the success of the North – whether in their own organizations or cities, by mentoring young people, or by collaborating with people from other industries and sectors. While not all respondents felt that they were able to make a significant contribution to the North, and some of them expressed frustration at perceived barriers to doing so, many others said that they were making a difference within their own spheres of influence.

“[Contributing to the North] through the opening of a 6,000 square foot office in Manchester for ThoughtWorks, employing local talent, and working with and connecting local businesses, governments and charities.”
Ruth Harrison, Managing Director, ThoughtWorks

“Leading by example, setting up collaborative working groups, having a CSR policy, engaging stakeholders and employees. Coaching and mentoring aspiring leaders. Having a social conscience about the way I serve the area with affordable, accessible transport. Having a diverse approach to people engagement and management, caring about integrating disability awareness into all my business plan strategies.”
Jane Cole, Managing Director, Blackpool Transport

43% of respondents said they were contributing within their own organizations, whether in executive or non-executive positions, and took pride in their organizations and sectors.
“I offer leadership through my work as Dean of Manchester and my chief role is to “hold the space for the entire community” so that we can gather in unity, develop solidarity with each other, mourn and celebrate together, celebrate our diversity, and build unity and cohesion in our city and beyond.”
Rogers Govender, Dean of Manchester, Manchester Cathedral

Mentoring youth was another area of leadership that respondents were actively involved in, with many regularly dedicating time to developing the next generation of leaders. They were optimistic about developing young leaders who would exemplify values such as inclusivity.

“I’m an advocate, ambassador and campaigner for values-based leadership and in particular diversity and inclusion. I’m mentoring, coaching and training future leaders, and thus developing a brighter future.”
Yaseer Ahmed, Director of Strategy and OD, Roccia

17% highlighted their collaboration with people from other organizations and sectors as a meaningful contribution to the success of the North.
The results of the survey provide valuable insight into what people think of leadership in the North of England, and what they believe good leadership looks like. Many respondents are proactively contributing to its success – whether by mentoring the next generation of leaders or by collaborating with people from other sectors – and they are optimistic about the future of the North.

This survey demonstrates that while there are many examples of good leadership in the North, there is a need for more leaders who are collaborative, inclusive and visionary. Inclusivity, in particular, was an area where respondents saw a significant disparity between what is needed and what is actually practised. There is also scope for stronger and more diverse networks within and across the private, public and not-for-profit sectors.

We are left with some key questions about leadership in the North: what more can be done to strengthen and diversify networks across the North? How can we tackle the skills gap so that the future leaders demonstrate the leadership qualities considered most important? And what more can leaders do at an individual and organizational level to contribute to the success of the North?

Common Purpose is committed to developing inclusive and culturally intelligent leaders who have strong and diverse networks, and who we believe will address the skills gap highlighted in this report. Please connect with us if you would like to know more or discuss opportunities for collaboration.

“Good leadership manifests itself in all sorts of different ways, and across all sectors. If there is something that I have learned, it is that you don’t need to be in a similar field to share best practices and ideas. We are all stronger together in this diverse world we live in, and leadership is not based on authority or power.”

Richard Halstead, Operations Manager, Sandcastle Waterpark
Thank you to everyone who participated in this survey on leadership in the North of England.

About Common Purpose

Common Purpose is a not-for-profit leadership development organization that specializes in cross boundary leadership. Founded in 1989, we run programmes in over 100 cities worldwide, and have more than 75,000 Alumni.

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