A lot has changed and so must leadership – we need to lead beyond ‘authority’, explain Manny Sandhu and Louise Teboul

Today’s challenge – tomorrow’s world

We live in a world full of complex problems. The year 2023 has been about challenging us if we can get, but in a connected world it is a real suggestion of what is to come? The world is changing fast and the pace of change will only increase.

We face problems that are interconnected, problems that can only be solved by leaders who see the bigger picture and adapt to an ever-changing context. These problems cross multiple boundaries, be that of sector, ways of thinking, faith, and geography or culture – yet most leaders do not cross those boundaries easily.

A heritage of a leadership culture, rather than development. The need to encourage and support leaders who can operate outside of their organisation, within the wider system, and navigate through these complex problems has been elevated due to the pandemic. Investing in leaders, at all levels, is a key part of the role of West Midlands Employers (WME) towards building a stronger West Midlands workforce. WME recognises that enabling our leaders to lead beyond authority, with a focus on inclusive leadership and cultural intelligence is vital for today’s challenges and tomorrow’s world.

Earlier this year WME partnered with Common Purpose, an organisation who have been working with diverse, cross-sector leaders for more than 30 years – bringing them together to learn from, and with each other, through real-life, honest conversations about the challenges of leadership. They are passionate about supporting people to be more effective, better leaders, in both their organisations and the places they live and work in. They achieve this by creating a safe environment where individuals can challenge themselves and cross-boundaries of all types.

Common Purpose has always focused on leading change and collaboration and it has always had an impact, with people forging bonds that last many years after their programmes, but now, more than ever, they believe we need to support leaders to be agile, lead people and solve complex problems.

And all of this needs to be achieved against the current context of ongoing uncertainty, when none of us know what’s going to happen in the future, let alone next month.

What makes a Common Purpose leader stand out?

When the world was free from social distancing and ‘lockdown’ restrictions, there was an important Common Purpose leadership café conversation event, held at Aston University, to celebrate their 30-year anniversary. The event was mainly for Common Purpose alumni and was full of leaders from all walks of life – from private, public, third sector, and across the regions, debating and sharing ideas. What intrigued most was how each leader used cultural intelligence to lead and connect, valuing the learning that comes from diverse perspectives.

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So, leading across boundaries through collaboration is vital.

It was interesting seeing their leadership experiences and style, and when asked what lessons they took – some years on from the programmes – the key messages they illustrated included:

- Showing the ability to be more inclusive, enabling them to lead innovative and resilient teams
- Broadening of their thinking, helping them with better decision-making
- Becoming more collaborative, enabling them to navigate through and accelerate complex change
- Exercising openness and vulnerability, leading with authenticity and keeping true to what’s at one’s core values and purpose.
- So why do we need cultural intelligence? And why is this important now more than ever before?

We are facing and will continue to face national and global problems that require old and new divides to be crossed. Complex problems cannot be solved by one person, one culture, one region, or even one continent, operating alone. So, leading across boundaries through collaboration is crucial.

Authorities will need public, private and not-for-profit sectors to find ways to work more effectively together, if they are to use their resources and assets to best effect. We can only do this through better collaboration, better networks and these networks need to be as diverse as possible.

We need no other example of this, than the challenges resulting from COVID-19 which has required organisations to develop creative solutions, under time and resource constraints, and while we have seen much innovation throughout local government, there is much more we can and must to do.

We will need new ideas, and diversity is important because innovation comes from well-led discord. We need to avoid ‘group-think’ at all costs. Culturally diverse groups, led by leaders with cultural intelligence see things differently. Innovation needs people who actively seek out difference.

Developing cultural intelligence can’t be done with a textbook solution, because we have to share and understand lived experience and different contexts, which only experiential learning can provide. That’s why the programmes use the idea of the diverse participant groups as a ‘human library’ providing a safe space to be curious, ask questions and understand from the perspectives of others. And one should not underestimate the importance of having a safe space to discuss what is happening in society and within your organisations.

There’s no doubt this has been a challenging year for many leaders, and organisations, as well as dealing with the pandemic, there has been the Black Lives Matter movement which has brought a renewed focus on anti-racism, social and racial inequality. Participants on our programmes have really valued the opportunity to talk to others, talk about the ‘tough stuff’ and get support, at a time when many are working in new, different ways, under pressure, and missing the normality we once had.

Real-life leadership is at the core of the programme. That development of a much wider perspective, and the ability to understand and empathise with the position of others (in different contexts) is such an invaluable leadership asset. Common Purpose gives people a safe, confidential environment and the opportunity to step outside of their own organisation, and really explore different ways of working. Contributors who join as part of the programmes help demonstrate the value of bringing diverse groups and individuals together and looking at things through different lenses, changing and expanding our own viewing platform and that of others.

Leadership can be a lonely place, especially right now, and we don’t think it can be learnt from a book, but having a diverse group of contributors, and peers, to support you in your leadership challenges and journey can be hugely beneficial.

We’re confident that this programme can help leaders through one of the most challenging, uncertain and pivotal points in their careers, and help the sector in building recovery plans for a better future.

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- West Midlands Employers: https://www.wmemployers.org.uk
- Common Purpose: https://commonpurpose.org/

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