

Lessons in Unusual Leadership

Event Summary

Vice Admiral Tony Johnstone-Burt, Master of the Royal Household, Vice Admiral Duncan Potts, Director General Joint Force Development & Defence Academy and Claire Bassett, newly appointed Chief Executive of the Electoral Commission, and former Chief Executive of the Parole Board hosted a panel discussion on uncommon challenges in the leadership and management of people, offering ACE members the opportunity to learn from their experiences across military and civil society.

The event was facilitated by Richard Burge, Chief Executive of Wilton Park (and formerly of the Countryside Alliance, and the Zoological Society of London), who began by stressing the diversity of management challenges across ALBs, in both people and institutions. There were three main questions for the speakers to address, notably what they felt their biggest managing challenge was, how they feel they equip their staff for leadership, and also any positive examples they have from their experiences. Some of the key leadership characteristics to emerge from the discussion were as follows:

Creative Leadership

Vice Admiral Duncan Potts felt an important leadership challenge was understanding the fundamental difference between command and leadership. Where ability to command offers a position of authority and management abilities and operational skills, it does not necessarily make you a successful leader able to create, protect and inspire a vision. Within the military's hierarchical structure, there is a danger to divert from personal leadership, so as a leader there is a challenge to remain adaptive and creative. Mid-level education and training in the military is something that Duncan-Potts felt many organisations could learn from, in beginning to prepare staff for leadership roles in their mid-seniority phase, taking a year out to train them outside the military context and trying to allow more freedom of thought and open young minds to creative leadership.

Embracing Diversity

Vice-Admiral Johnstone-Burt, and Vice-Admiral Duncan Potts were both able to talk about experiences of managing teams of different cultures with varying degrees authority. They outlined the need to embrace diversity and take the time to learn different cultures in order to operate different leadership styles simultaneously. Trust and respect are fundamental aspects of sustaining a position of leadership, but also key in facilitating the ability to change behaviours of your team when necessary. Communication is also important and one suggestion was that leaders could use senior facilitators in order to host open discussions when faced with a challenging team, which was also a good opportunity for engagement between senior management and issues on the ground of an organisation. Likewise, joint-staff courses were also a suggestion to allow senior staff to understand their teams better.

Managing Change

Change can be a difficult sales pitch, especially if a new system requires changing the behaviours of your staff. As a Chief Executive and superior, but also a new member of the Parole Board, Claire Bassett felt the most important way for her to implement change was through engagement; allowing team members to voice their opinions on how to approach delivery differently. When introducing changes, she stressed the need for a charismatic approach, and although it is important to establish yourself as the leader, it is also important to reassure and support your team.

Understanding your purpose

All three leaders, stressed the importance of understanding the nature of your spokespeople. The type of person that is attracted to the role is also something that must be considered in the type of leadership you adopt. During the roundtable discussion it was stressed that although transformation and finding efficiencies is important, it must not cloud the purpose of the organisation. The vision of the organisation is not stagnant, it must adapt to changing political winds and circumstances and therefore can often require calculated risk-taking. Leaders must take a proactive role in creating a dialogue between themselves and ministers in ensuring while creating efficiencies, the purpose and strategic delivery of services remains at the core of management capabilities.

Concluding points:

The opportunity to hear from speakers with very different experiences of leadership across civil and military society demonstrated the diversity of leadership approaches, but also key characteristics that make for strong leadership. Notably, adaptability, creativity and engagement.

This model of sharing methods of best practise was an invaluable way for ALB leaders to be exposed to a range of potential leadership approaches that could be helpful to the successful delivery of services across the public sector.