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Skills and learning for the housing industry of the future
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The ‘Right Stuff’ for leaders in social housing
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Summary

The housing industry has been in a period of ‘transition’ for many years. These changes are generating a context where existing strategies, values and behaviours are being called into question. This article explores what these changes will mean for leadership in the housing industry. It will also identify the key criteria for effective housing leaders of the future.

Introduction – learning from astronauts

In Tom Wolfe’s 1969 best-selling book and subsequent Hollywood film, The Right Stuff, the author describes the circumstances and characters surrounding the beginning of the Mercury space programme in the United States. Aside from many insights surrounding that period, one aspect resonates with the situation current leaders in social housing face. After initially assuming that the natural talent pool for astronauts would be the well-established and successful body of military test pilots, NASA recognised that the skills of test pilots (heroic, technically skilled individualists who were excellent pilots) would not fit with the behaviours required of astronauts. The role of astronauts called for analytical problem solving, patience, feeling comfortable when not in control, and most importantly being part of a team both in the capsule as well as on the ground. In essence, Wolfe creates a tension between what the ‘right stuff’ was for a test pilot and a very different set of capabilities for astronauts. There are signs now that the ‘right stuff’ for social housing leadership may also be in a similar transition.

Changing context = changing ‘stuff’

Social housing has been a sector in ‘transition’ for a significant time! Trends that have been building for a while appear to be creating a context where existing strategies, values and behaviours are being called into question. Contextual pressures are diverse but often point to the following four themes:

a) A changing social ideology in housing – away from a welfare oriented approach to one focusing on social and economic returns.

b) Social housing providers are increasingly encouraged to recognise the commercial aspects of providing a (up until now) regulated service and to identify innovative ways of growing the business.
c) Fragmentation and specialisation within the industry will create a diversity of business models (differing sources of revenue, a diversity of cost bases, and a re-evaluation of the investment/capital acquisition criteria).

d) A fundamental shift in how social housing providers use technology to deliver a more personalised service.2

In the same vein, Schofield (2008) highlights the challenges within the public sector:
I. Increasing pace of change.
II. Technological developments.
III. Changing perceptions.
IV. Increasing expectations.
V. Citizen empowerment.
VI. Changing workforce.
VII. Changing environment.

Current and aspiring leaders in social housing can look at the highlights illustrated in the above paragraph and mutter, ‘we have seen it all before’ – and they would be largely correct. However, that is also the problem – the solutions that they may have (inadvertently) put forward have not fundamentally changed their organisations or sustainably resolved the underlying causes of the situation.

**What was the ‘Right Stuff’?**

The practice of leadership in social housing is understandably diverse and no single model or approach can satisfactorily demonstrate the richness that is observed. However, on a generic level, leaders in social housing can sometimes be viewed as calling on their ability to assess the situation, stabilise the condition, and buy time to find a robust solution. In this context, successful leadership is viewed as comprising of: analytical problem solving, clear decision making and the articulation of direction. Sounds about right...*with one problem*...if the solution was so good, why does the problem continue to re-appear?

Ronald Heifetz and colleagues at the JFK School of Government at Harvard University have been examining the application of ‘technical leadership’. This approach can be effective in certain circumstances:

a) When there is a clear problem and solution.
b) The solution can be implemented by the exertion of authority.

c) The solution is easily accepted and leads to a lowering of conflict among stakeholders.

d) The solution restores equilibrium and leads to on-going stakeholder satisfaction.

Within social housing, it would appear that many solutions proposed and implemented by leadership teams were based on the presumptions of ‘technical leadership’ – a solution exists and can restore confidence and drive progress. By adopting leadership actions such as: short-term fixes, tightening of controls and restructuring, we create an appearance of the return of normalcy. This is an illusion that many leaders will recognise and seek some solace within.

However, as Heifetz and his colleagues point out, there are some pretty obvious indicators that technical leadership has been inappropriate. Clues include:

a) The same problem keeps re-surfacing.

b) There is resistance among stakeholders and you don’t really understand why.

c) People behave as if ‘the world is going to end’!

d) (And, perhaps most tellingly) you feel incompetent.

The ‘Right Stuff’ for social housing leadership

If you have skipped down to this section looking for prescriptive action points, you should read the previous section! The time constrained drive to find a solution is actually part of the leadership problem we can sometimes see within the sector. Chua et al (2011) refer to the ‘whiplash’ effect created by shorter electoral cycles and a pressure to engage in ‘change for changes sake’.

Heifetz and his colleagues put forward the term ‘adaptive leadership’ to describe the challenges facing individuals who wish to take on the challenge of providing organisational direction. At its highest level of abstraction, adaptive leadership can be distilled into four broad themes of leadership effectiveness:

1. Confrontation and prototyping – In his book, Good To Great, Jim Collins (2001) refers to leaders that are willing to challenge the status quo by focusing on ‘turning over rocks and looking at all of the squiggly things underneath... even if what you see can scare the hell out of you’(p.72). The challenge is not just to recognise the problem. Given that there are no ‘easy’ answers, leaders need to recognise that
effective solutions do not emerge from the first (often obvious) response. As a consequence, leadership teams need to adopt some practices used by innovation teams to ‘prototype’ alternative designs and actions. Prototyping takes time and effort and requires the acceptance of failure. Leaders need to champion experimentation to both fully understand the challenges as well as identify possible design solutions.

2. **Sustaining a ‘burning platform’** – The Nobel Prize winning economist, Herbert Simon (1955), coined the term ‘satisficing’ to identify actions that satisfy minimum requirements (‘good enough’). Adaptive leaders actively avoid such outcomes by a dogged determination to find innovative solutions. Often such solutions require radical approaches that incorporate a diversity of inputs and a healthy dose of creative thinking.

3. **Leadership is a team game** – Hierarchy is often the enemy of adaptive leadership. By looking upwards for preferred outcomes or decisions, leadership is over-ruled by organisational expediency. Adaptive leaders foster leadership responsibility at all levels of an organisation. All stakeholders should be mobilised to generate solutions. This takes time and patience – particularly when cultural norms run counter to shared leadership. An important element is the need to enhance the culture of diversity so that a multiplicity of options can be identified, evaluated and implemented. Ulrich and Smallwood (2012) highlight the paradox that the focus on developing individual leaders can sometimes constrain the development of leadership. Effective leaders must actively seek to enhance the bench strength of leadership in the organisation to the point where they become recognised as ‘leader feeders’ for other organisations. Of course, there is regret when talent goes elsewhere, but the benefit is that young talent is also attracted by the prospect of growth and development.

4. **Understanding your ‘inner game’** – The renowned sports coach and writer Timothy Gallwey (2000) identified that to be successful in any endeavour; individuals (including leaders) need to recognise their own human nature – which includes characteristics such as fear, self-doubt, lapses in focus, and limiting concepts or assumptions. The inner game is played to overcome the self-imposed obstacles that prevent an individual or team from accessing their full potential. To maintain oneself as an effective leader, individuals need to look after their own emotional well-being by ensuring that they have outlets to question themselves and reflect on their behaviours. Coaching and mentoring often can be useful in this regard.
Are you an adaptive leader?

Although no simple set of questions can portray how adaptive leadership is effectively undertaken in any organisation, the following set of questions (adapted from Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky, 2009) can be a good start for assessing adaptive leadership in an organisation:

- How frequently does the ‘unspeakable’ get said and discussed? How quickly are crises surfaced and bad news discussed (rather than impose a knee-jerk reaction)?
- How apparent are behaviours that are broadly seen as acting for the benefits of the organisation rather than protecting individual groups or silos?
- When someone is seen to take a risk in service of the organisational mission, and it does not work out, to what extent is this seen as a learning opportunity rather than a failure?
- To what extent are senior managers seen to identify and mentor their successors?
- To what extent do individuals and teams in the organisation reflect and learn from experience?

The ‘Right Stuff’ leads to the right results

The Government of Singapore has instituted the PS21 programme. This initiative is designed to ‘encourage a mind-set that welcomes experimentation and a desire to continually find new and better ways of doing things. PS21 gives every public officer the mandate and platform to contribute their ideas for a successful Public Service’. Although broad in scope, the PS21 initiative is designed to encourage a people-centred mass movement to increase involvement and commitment to new, innovative solutions to persistent social problems. Such approaches call upon principles of co-creation and collaboration across organisational boundaries. In the UK, NESTA is working with local councils and other public sector institutions to nurture collaborative activities (Boyle & Harris, 2010). It is clear from an organisational perspective that such practices can potentially offer many benefits. However, for such initiatives to be sustained requires leadership teams that recognise the advantages and are prepared to adopt different values and behaviours that foster openness, innovation and culture change.

Social housing and the public sector in general, are struggling with the legacy of a culture that reinforced a reluctance to fundamentally alter how organisations saw themselves and their operating environments. In much the same way as the ‘heroic’ test pilots of the 1950s and 60s were seen as representing previous accomplishments,
leaders in social housing must look beyond what has worked in the past and adopt behaviours that suit the new conditions facing the public sector. A dogged determination that solutions can be found by adhering to behaviours and perspectives that we have experienced in the past is likely to lead to under-performance. Instead, we must recognise that new models of leadership must emerge that take into account the fundamental truth that new perspectives and behaviours – drawn from a wide range of sources and experiences will be necessary if we are to deliver on our promises.

**Finding out more**


Key points

- Rapid change in the housing industry is creating a challenge for leaders where existing strategies, values and behaviours are being called into question.
- The solutions put forward in the past may no longer be effective for the future: in fact they are likely to lead to under-performance.
- Adaptive leadership is an approach which enables leaders to thrive in changing and challenging contexts.
- Leaders must be prepared to adopt different values and behaviours that foster openness, innovation and culture change.
Endnotes


2 Acknowledgement to John Thornhill for his insights from his unpublished document: *CIH and EMHG Skills & Learning Roundtable* (April 2013)