Emerging models of leadership in social housing

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Since 2001, the CIH and Warwick Business School have been working together to design and provide the Leadership Programme for Housing. Since its inception, approximately 250 senior leaders have taken part in the programme and contributed to its success and its evolution. This contribution highlights the changes we have seen in the sector and how it relates to the concerns being expressed by leaders dealing with these changes. It also represents the evolving nature of the programme curriculum as we strive to ‘keep ahead’ of the leadership challenges necessary to deliver organisational success.

Leadership is about change
A fundamental paradox of being an effective leader is that being an excellent manager can sometimes hold back good leadership. Management is about creating order, predictable outcomes and delivering on promises. Leadership is about change. Most leaders accept that their organisation needs to be able to respond to changes in the operating environment. However, it is clear that higher-performing social housing providers go beyond this remit and focus on anticipating change – shaping their organisation’s resources, capabilities and relationships to suit what ‘will be’ rather than what ‘is’.

10 tips for higher performing leaders
Before offering some conclusions from our experiences in the social housing sector, we should first state our caveat...it all depends! The sector contains a broad range of challenges and the responses of leadership teams vary. Indeed, we can foresee even more fragmentation and specialisation – where social housing becomes blurred with other local community provision and commercial imperatives. In this environmental mosaic, we can perceive the following themes of effective leadership emerging:

1. Doing more with less. The size of one’s balance sheet is no longer a sign of success. Leaders need to find ways of leveraging a more limited asset base (and organisational size) to deliver value.

2. Dealing with legacy orthodoxies. Many organisations suffer under the heavy hand of history and can be victims of past successes and failures. Leaders need to recognise the benefits of the ‘legacy effect’ but not let it drive their future direction or actions.

3. Encouraging fresh thinking and innovation. A critical role of any leader is to be the ‘Chief Innovation Officer’ for their organisation. This is not about being ‘creative’;
rather it is about nurturing, championing and measuring the organisation’s ability to innovate.

4. **Designing organisations from the outside-in.** We all have experience dealing with organisations that appear to be designed to suit their own internal purposes. Effective leaders work hard to re-design their organisations from the outside-in. The goal is to make the organisation appear to be the ‘perfect’ complement to key stakeholders.

5. **Championing collaborative relationships in a transactional marketplace.** There is no getting away from the recognition that organisations must meet short-term targets. However, leaders need to adopt a perspective of organisational sustainability that encourages long-term value creation. To achieve this, leaders must identify suitable partners that share similar goals and ambitions and work together in a mutually supportive (but still commercially beneficial) way.

6. **Developing the high-performing workforce.** A high-performing workforce is one where every single individual is committed to being the best they can be. However, leaders often struggle with people who are poorly suited or lack the skills to excel in a particular role. Leaders need to be committed to supporting the workforce to excel and, in those cases, where the fit is not right, to make the necessary changes. Anything less is to tolerate under-performance.

7. **Managing risk and uncertainty.** A rapidly changing operating environment has meant that leaders need to be more astute in committing resources to projects and initiatives. Rather than committing themselves and their organisations to relatively high-risk outcomes, leaders need to be able to ‘learn and adapt’ rapidly through prototyping and continuous refinement of objectives.

8. **Building a leadership pipeline.** Despite all of the training and development to the contrary, leadership is not about individual superstars. Leadership is a team game. This team comprises immediate peers, but also improving the bench strength of leadership within the organisation through developing, mentoring, coaching and better career development.

9. **Confronting difficult decisions.** Leaders need to recognise that their role is not a popularity contest. It may not be comfortable but leaders need to develop fair and transparent ways of negotiating outcomes. This is not the same as being obstinate, but at the same time it is about being consistent and focused.

10. **Bias towards action.** Many initiatives founder due to excessive dialogue or lack of consistent support. Successful leadership requires steely resolve and moving rapidly to implementation and refining actions along the way.
Experienced leaders will be able to look at the list above and offer examples of how they have sought to make an impact in many of these areas. We believe these examples need to be disseminated more widely and offer insights into how aspiring leaders need to develop. It is only by developing organisational leaders that feel comfortable dealing with these challenges that we will be able to respond to the exceptional opportunities that lie ahead of us.

A self-diagnostic test

If you have managed to get this far into this article, then you possibly share some sympathy with the views expressed! The next stage of reflection is, perhaps, to wonder if you are a high-performing leader. High-performing leadership is about amplifying your actions so that they are clearly seen by all internal and external stakeholders. If nobody notices your actions, then, quite simply, you are not doing all that well! Here is a quick test: ask ten individuals whom you have worked with for at least a few months to describe you as a leader (they could be peers, staff, or stakeholders). You are not looking for feedback here, all you want to know is what actions they have observed which they attribute to your leadership. Fewer than ten individuals is cheating and unlikely to be a valid sample. Have the individuals identify at least three situations in which you were seen to be exerting leadership. They should write these situations down and send them to you. Reviewing the data you collect, try to allocate the illustrations you have received from your sample with the ten characteristics of high-performing leaders. It is unlikely that you will exhibit superhero status and have ticked all the characteristics! However, those characteristics that dominate form the core of your leadership ‘DNA’. Doing more of them will enhance your personal leadership brand. In addition, consider those characteristics that you feel are important, but which do not appear to be recognised. How can you amplify your actions and behaviours so that people take notice? In six months time, try this exercise again!

Final thoughts

There is no single ‘photofit’ to becoming a high-performing leader. We do know that within social housing there are some terrific role models of leadership. We can all learn from their experiences, as well as from leaders in many other contexts. As said earlier, the level of uncertainty in the social housing sector is high. This should not be seen as a threat, but rather as an opportunity to develop great organisational leadership teams that use resources more effectively to deliver sustainable organisational success. Leaders that can continually build on success rather than appear shackled to it will be the role models of the future.