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## Leadership in an age of austerity

**After spending much of his career studying the concept of leadership in leisure, Martyn Allison wonders what good leadership looks like in an age of austerity and offers some suggestions on the skills we might look for in a new generation of management professionals.**

A decade ago when I commenced my journey to help improve culture and sport services I knew leadership was a key ingredient in the mix of skills necessary to improve services and deliver better outcomes. Leadership was important alongside a range of management activities including strategy, people management, resource management and performance management. Inspection and peer review work quickly showed that excellence was nearly always found where there was good political and managerial leadership, while failure was nearly always found where leadership was weak. What I now realise is that leadership is not an ingredient but the main ingredient in managing change, improvement and, in these times of austerity, survival. Without it organisations, and therefore services, fail.

I have always recognised the distinction between management and leadership but what is clearer to me now is that without leadership there is no good management. Leadership is the DNA that makes it all work and, in the present climate of unprecedented financial and social challenges within public service, leadership is mission-critical to how the sector responds. It will dictate whether the sector comes through the recession or not. The constant challenge of reducing cost, raising efficiency, doing things differently and delivering better outcomes for individuals and communities is testing managerial capacity and capability to the limits. However, where leadership is good and effective, culture and sport is not only surviving but in many places is growing and demonstrating huge improvements in outputs and outcomes.

So what does good leadership look like in this age of austerity? What differentiates it from good management or for that matter from average leadership? We seem to know what it feels like when we are in the presence of good leaders but can we train people to be better leaders. Are great leaders born or made?

Concerned by a widening leadership deficit across the sector, over recent months I have been analysing more deeply the question of what makes good leadership. Although I have revisited some of the traditional textbooks and theories, I have not found an answer I am totally comfortable with. I have revisited the thinking of my colleagues Ian and Dave from Greengage consulting. In their new book, *From Know How to Do How: A Simple Short Guide to Making Change Happen*, they focus on the behavioural aspects of change management and the importance of personal and organisational values. In conjunction with Steve Wood, we have tested some of these same ideas in terms of explaining collaborative leadership in our work with the English Federation of Disability Sport (EFDS) and recently in a workshop for the Sport and Recreation Alliance leadership conference. I am becoming increasingly convinced that good leadership – as opposed to just leadership – is not about skills and competences but about behaviour and, more importantly, behaviours that are underpinned by the right values.

I have observed and worked with many leaders who I admire because [www.theleisurereview.co.uk](http://www.theleisurereview.co.uk)

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they are visionary, strategic in their thinking, bold, prepared to take risks, fearless and drive others towards a new state. However, I find that at the same time I do not always respect them. Equally I find that the people I do respect are those that are honest with me and others, have integrity which means I trust what they say and do, care about me and others in terms of how change is affecting us, and above all have real passion and belief in what they are trying to achieve. They are comfortable with the fact that the means of achieving change are as important, if not more important, than the end.

But these softer, value-based behaviours are often looked down on or even viewed as weaknesses, particularly at this time of intense, rapid and constant change. Managers are told to toughen up, get real and move on if they cannot take the heat. It is as if austerity requires a more 'macho' style of leadership. But is it not about getting the balance right, the right mix of behaviours? Good leadership in these difficult times is about getting the right blend of vision and strategic thinking, boldness, risk-taking and drive but underpinned by honesty, integrity and care for those involved. That is what good leaders do. That is good leadership.

As austerity bites in public services I see many people, including those providing services and those receiving them, being hurt by the changes taking place. While most people accept that things have to change and we have to respond to the difficult financial situation, I increasingly hear them criticise how the process of change was done, how people were or are being treated. As I write there is a fierce conversation taking place about the parliamentary debate on food banks. The focus is not on the policy but on how certain individuals behaved in parliament, what they said and what they did. Our politicians have to lead and take tough decisions but do we trust them; do we think they care about those being hurt by the changes? I think maybe not.

So for me good leadership in these difficult times is not only about defining a vision, setting a sense of direction and taking tough decisions. It is about understanding the impact of the changes on others, showing that you care about them and being honest with people in a way that enables them to trust you and believe what you say. This is a demanding role, particularly when as individuals we already feel overwhelmed by what is going on around us.

Good leaders are a rare commodity because they have a unique mix of skills and abilities that can both create and lead change while also demonstrating behaviours that show they understand, sympathise and can manage the consequences of the change they create on individuals. Good leaders and good leadership is values-driven and therefore I fear we cannot train them in a traditional sense; but we can recruit future leaders with the right values and then train them to be good leaders.

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