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Leadership in sport: a local authority perspective

With sport and leisure services under intense pressure to justify every aspect of their work, Mark Allman explains why strong and intelligent leadership is a prerequisite for driving change and meeting the challenges of delivering excellence.

Working within the current local government environment has probably never been more challenging for sport and leisure-based services. It makes the current craze of the ice bucket challenge look like a walk in the park by comparison. At a time when managers and staff can easily become despondent one can overlook the fabulous role that sport and leisure services play in the lives of residents and visitors. Our sector has a lot to be proud of, not least the fantastic sports events recently held in the UK. The London 2012 Olympics, the 2014 Tour de France in Yorkshire and the recently concluded Commonwealth Games 2014 in Glasgow were all fabulous spectacles that provided a showcase to the world of what the UK has to offer. All were hugely successful and all will have relied on local authorities to step up to the challenge, which they did in bucket fuls.

The story doesn't stop there. We will all be able to think of examples that illustrate the great things we do but our sector faces further challenges ahead and therefore we have to continue to evolve. We have to continue to do the things we do well and work differently and better where we need to improve. Strong and intelligent leadership is a prerequisite for driving change and responding to the fast-spinning world around us.

There isn't a silver bullet. Successful leadership within our sector will depend on the ability to marry the creation of a clear and credible vision with the ability to secure the buy-in from staff and stakeholders to deliver it. In times of austerity the leader will set the tone and the appetite for change. The reality is that this is never easy, especially when operating within a wider local authority with competing and sometimes conflicting pressures. It is also increasingly unlikely that there will be heads of service or directors with sole responsibility for sport or leisure/culture and where they do exist they may sometimes be in part fulfilled via partnerships or contracts with social enterprises/trusts. That said, our sector is used to change and perhaps more adept than others in finding creative solutions to often complex problems.

Without wanting to trigger academic debates about what defines great leadership, it will almost certainly include the role of coaching within the leadership mix. Many performance coaches well understand the importance of "creating an environment where success is inevitable" and therefore they also understand the ingredients for success at the highest level. There will tend to be clarity in terms of accountability and roles within the coach-athlete relationship and this helps greatly in meeting targets or outcomes, a luxury we don't always have as a sector when working across stakeholders. But as leaders we need more skill sets than coaching alone. Therefore the leader also needs to have a sound grasp of other key skills, such as the art of constructing successful teams, establishing and maintaining effective partnerships and developing mutual alliances in order to help deliver outcomes, especially when major or radical change is needed.

"The leader's ability to influence political thinking at all levels and across different portfolios is vitally important."

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Perhaps most critically of all, leadership requires the establishment of a belief system that people can buy into. Staff and stakeholders need to know that the leader means what they say and that they have a cause and vision to follow. The austerity measures that local authorities face has resulted in some extremely painful decisions but in among this pain there are opportunities to address long-standing inefficiencies, to really focus on what matters and make positive change. It is all too easy to fall into the trap of cynicism and therefore a positive mind set becomes vital in such times. Young, aspiring leaders will take note as the values held and enacted upon by the leader helps define and drive more successful outcomes.

Local authorities as a whole will operate to their corporate values, perceived as somewhat “motherhood and apple pie” by some but typically designed to fit a broad span of services. They are often hard to disagree with. For the leader in a local authority with responsibility for sport the evident shift in the way services are commissioned and then delivered raises the question of whether these broad-based corporate values are sufficient alone. The layers of complexity increase as lines blur between traditional local authority functions and the space now occupied by partners (eg universities, social enterprises, voluntary sector, commercial sector) . The role of the local authority in providing sports services requires clarity of thought about what services it should provide directly itself (in the case of facilities, often a result of market failure) and what it enables as part of its place-shaping or strategic leadership role. The local authority leader will therefore find themselves at the heart of a complex jigsaw puzzle and will need to find a way of getting the most from the sum of the parts. In simple terms, the local authority leader needs to reflect on their ability to influence and shape locally the vision for the organisation they work for, the vision of the service(s) they manage and the vision for sport within the district or area they cover (a partnership strategy).

Given that the environment we operate in is increasingly complex and corporate values alone may not be enough, the most fundamental point is that the values you believe in and that drive you as an individual are the most important. I believe these are critical; when times are tough these will often shine through. Values such as vision, passion, ambition (thinking big), openness, resilience, determination, integrity, adaptability, altruism and honesty are central to driving change and improvement across your district or area . Let us also not forget the value of humour. When times are hard it is a powerful ally. These values will all help shape and influence the work of your teams. They will also influence the way wider delivery partners work with you as a local authority to deliver great outcomes for the people who live and work in your district/area.

Expanding this point further, success will not solely be dependent on leadership from one individual, although clearly it is a vital component. The performance of our sector is dependent on the leadership of our key stakeholders too; this includes, for example, politicians, sports governing bodies, other council chief officers (adult social care, children’s, economic development, etc), sports networks, county sports partnerships, public health, clinical commissioning groups and the further/higher education sectors. If there are leadership gaps in the wider system it makes it harder for the local authority leader to do their job well and achieve ambitions for both the local authority and the collective good of the stakeholders. The more gaps there are the harder it is.

The right type of leadership across our sector can produce better partnerships and help us move to greater collaborative approaches. The transition into more collaborative working is not an easy one given the range of independent stakeholders locally, regionally and nationally. Moving to more collaborative approaches will be dependent on the stage of development of the partnership and the leadership skills of the

key stakeholders. As partnerships mature it is possible for more work to be focused on the contribution of partners to the ' bigger picture ' and subsequently therefore matters of alignment and clarity of roles in delivering outcomes. This is not easy to get right and some may wonder if it is worth the effort but doing nothing is not an option. From a personal perspective, this is something that our own local sports network (yes, we can use that word), SportLeeds, is achieving right now with tremendous support from all the stakeholders engaged with its work. There is no doubt that the SportLeeds partnership is helped enormously by great political support for sport from within the city council and it is hugely rewarding to witness the partnership strengthen from year to year . However, it takes hard work and support from all the key partners to make it work well.

The future success of the sport sector will be dependent on the way we work together and maximise the sum of our parts. To that end we need to be skilled in working within the political (with both a big and small P) environment we operate in . The leader's ability to influence political thinking at all levels and across different portfolios is vitally important. The values that drive you as a leader need be put into best effect in the development of political relationships and your role in advocating the role of sport and leisure in meeting council and district/area outcomes. Developing positive political relationships has always been important but it is arguably more important than ever when services are under such financial pressure. Equally important is using your leadership skills to develop relationships with and influence the commissioners of services or external funders where sport and leisure can play pivotal roles. Our ability to influence policy and spending decisions is being put to the test more than ever and it is an area we ignore at our peril. Our thinking as leaders needs to shift towards developing our offer to support the delivery of these wider district/area outcomes. We cannot survive on the intrinsic value of sport alone.

The leadership challenge we face is complex and there is no blueprint for the perfect leader. Being sufficiently hardnosed to deal with austerity could be seen as counter to the softer skills needed to build partnerships and develop staff in your teams. Perhaps leaders today have to have an iron hand in a velvet glove? The leader needs to set the tone and build the team with the skill sets needed to get the job done, working closer than ever with stakeholders and staff, and encouraging constructive challenge and debate from all quarters, both within and outside your own organisation. Leaders have to take the rough with the smooth; delivering change will always bring some dissatisfaction from staff and stakeholders, yet the rewards of success for our sector are potentially great. We have to be prepared with steely determination for the rigours of the challenge and move quickly and decisively when opportunities present themselves.

We are operating in an increasingly complex environment where clarity and quality of leadership in our sector has become paramount and where greater collaboration provides a way of responding to that challenge. We need to ensure that our sector is developing and nurturing our leaders for the future, therefore I would stress the future role of CIMSPA as particularly important. CIMSPA's work needs full-sector support and cCLOA will continue to play its part in securing leadership development opportunities across the culture and leisure sector, helping the sport and active leisure sector be the best it can be.

In conclusion, for those of us who work in the sector and value the intrinsic nature of sport and active leisure, we are very lucky. We need to continue to learn from others and not be afraid of failure from trying something new. Those that have embraced change and taken a broader view of the world we work in will tend to be in better shape than those that have not. We are used to change but we now need to strive towards greater transformational change and collaboration across the sector, working smarter and shaping the thinking and actions of the

decision-makers around us.

Are you up to the leadership challenge?

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With additional contributions from Chris Cutforth, Sheffield Hallam University

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