

Leading or lagging behind?

Following The Leisure Review Summit in June the Improvement and Development Agency for local government (IDeA) took the bones of the discussion reported in our July issue and offered the question “Leading or lagging behind: where is the thought leadership in the culture, sport and leisure sector?” for discussion on the ‘knowledge’ part of their website. The resultant discussion prompted an unprecedented response that proved both wide-ranging and illuminating.

From the outset of the virtual debate people reflected on and discussed the skills and attributes displayed by effective leaders and identified a list most of which would be found in a standard text. The original article, however, had constructed ‘thought leadership’ as distinct from what might be called ‘practical leadership’. It was clear in the comments received that practical leadership is valued more highly in this sector than thought leadership.

The reason for this focus on the nuts and bolts seemed to be the tough economic conditions that are likely to prevail for another couple of years. Although it is unlikely that culture, sport and leisure will vanish, a reduction in resources is inevitable and the sector will therefore need to rethink the way it does business. Such circumstances, the argument went, demand leaders who are practical and tactical, and able to demonstrate the sector’s intrinsic merit and the contribution of culture, sport and leisure to broader social and economic outcomes. Achieving this will require good relationships within and outside of the sector, particularly with members of local strategic partnerships, regional and sub-regional networks, and non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs).

In practice, ‘practical’ and ‘thought’ leadership are inseparable. Indeed the existence and work of the London Cultural Improvement Group and the Cultural Improvement Partnership East Midlands demonstrate that thought leadership and practical leadership can be combined to deliver tangible improvements. Christine Parsloe, chair of the London Cultural Improvement Group and London Borough of Merton’s leisure and culture development manager, offered this response to the discussion: “It’s good to have debate and share ideas, success and failures... to learn from all of that. But greater than that, we must not just ‘talk the talk’ to deliver improvement and better cultural outcomes; we must ‘walk the walk’.” It became clear as the discussion developed that while there are some leaders in the sector driving much-needed creativity, innovation and improvement there is still a long way to go and leaders must be prepared to take risks and try new ways of working. On the positive side cultural improvement networks are leading the charge, as are those services that have embraced the strategic commissioning model.

On the subject of future leaders contributors argued that leadership can and should come from all levels and parts of the sector, not just those in recognised positions of authority. “There will always be an old guard and new young guard... but don’t get hung up on this. If someone has something to offer, listen to them, irrespective of how you or others package them!” said one. Another offered: “Unless and until we are open to ideas, to creative input, to criticism or encouragement, from people who fall outside that ‘recognised authority’, then the channels of ideas and action open to us will narrow and become increasingly difficult to navigate.” Strong words, so how did contributors think we should encourage young people to ‘take up the baton’? It seems that the responsibility need to be shared and, while each individual needs to take responsibility for their personal development, it also incumbent on organisations and the sector as a whole to ‘keep an eye’ on succession planning, seeking to stimulate an appetite for leadership among junior and middle managers.

Any discussion of ‘the sector’ or ‘the profession’ will sooner or later touch on the role of national and regional cultural and sporting agencies, and the professional membership bodies. Contributions acknowledged that these agencies potentially have key roles to play in developing and promoting the sector but their impact can be diminished by their complexity, the continuing ‘silo’ mentality within sport, culture and leisure, and of course funding issues. Significantly, the consensus view was that the creation of a single-sector professional body may be unrealistic in the short term. Nevertheless, there needs to be more co-ordination, co-operation and exchange of knowledge and ideas between professional bodies, non-departmental public bodies (NDPB), regional and sub-regional networks, and other key stakeholders. Greater cohesion would put the sector in a far stronger position by enabling it to publicise its successes and raise its profile within local government and it would also create valuable opportunities for current and emerging leaders to debate ideas. The jury seemed to be out, however, on whether the efforts being made to create a chartered institute for sport and the wider sector will be successful and whether other organisations will follow this lead.

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There was a clear sense in the contributions that what happens next in the sector is up to the people involved in it professionally. If people in the sector are happy with the state of its leadership the debate need go no further. However if 'we' are not happy then perhaps we' need to step forward and do something about it. The Local Government Association's culture, sport and tourism board is in no doubt and recently highlighted what it sees as the leadership deficit in the sector. It is keen to facilitate a debate on how this can be addressed in the future. However, although the National Culture Forum is running its second Leading Learning Programme, unless individuals are supported to attend it, the third programme, planned for 2010, could be the last.

With an election pending and change in the wind, the debate considered the difficult times ahead for the public sector in general. Contributors were sure that the culture, sport and leisure sector as a whole needs to engage with the debate about the future of public services and our role in that future. Maybe now is the time for the sector to consider seriously how practical and strategic leadership can be used to drive the sector forward.

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