

# Leading change and changing leadership in the public sector (UK)

Dame Pat Collarbone  
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The public sector is facing structural change on a scale unprecedented in my lifetime. The nature and timing of this change I will let others debate. What I am passionate about, and have spent the past ten years exploring, refining and delivering, is how to bring about cultural change at both a local and system level; change that impacts on how people work and behave and that delivers efficient and effective services.

There are many excellent public servants and services but I, like others, have become increasingly concerned at a public sector dogged by a culture of command and control and excessive bureaucracy. This has cascaded down through the system so that we are now in a position where many people do not know what it means to take up their own authority. It has virtually paralysed some services and has not only led to inefficiencies, but has also had unintended consequences.

For much of the past decade change in the public sector in the UK has been based on growth. With one million additional workers employed over the last ten years, many change initiatives have focused on growing services some way beyond their primary function. It is also true that demand for a service will expand to match the supply. The challenge is to identify the core purpose of a service and to work in the most efficient way to achieve that purpose.

I strongly believe that most dysfunction and waste in the public sector can be traced back to poor leadership, inappropriate structures and inefficient

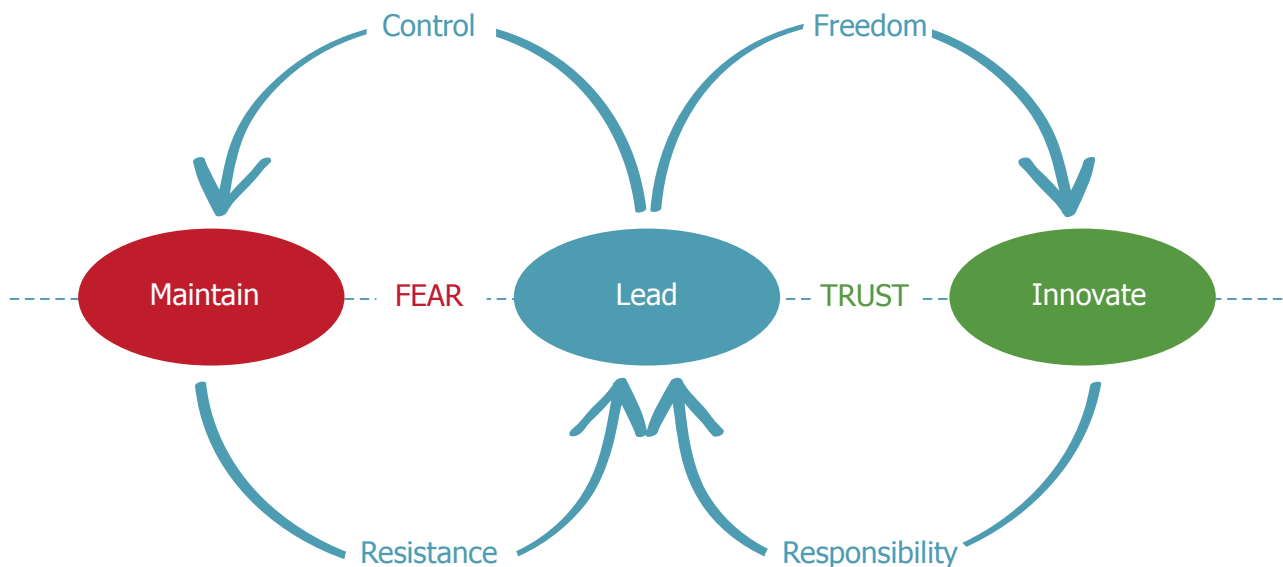
processes, rather than deficient staff. It is the leadership that sets the strategy and direction and whether change comes about is down to their willingness to adapt. It is often very hard and painful for them to discard ways of working they have developed over many years and that have served them well in the past. So they not only have to make personal changes but, in order for their organisations to thrive, they have to find ways of encouraging employees' passion, initiative and creativity.

There is rarely an article on leadership and management that doesn't mention the pace of change in the world and the need to be adaptable but the difficulty lies in turning words into practice. How to bring about lasting change is rarely mentioned other than in vague terms.

I believe that in every organisation there already exists the potential to address this through improved leadership and engaging more employees in tackling key challenges.

## The solution: autonomy and accountability

The biggest challenge in a time of cuts is building trust. To release creativity people need to believe they are working on something fundamentally worthwhile and that they are being treated as adults. My experience shows that leaders need to focus on working with their people to change their organisations, rather than trying to change their employees. By changing the organisation I mean the structures, roles, relationships, policies and ways of working, areas often considered management's prerogative.



A leader still needs to set the direction of the organisation, ensure that the right people are in the right job, to explicitly define managerial authority and accountability, clearly articulate measurable outcomes and reward effort appropriately. By engaging staff in critical decisions and the implementation of change they can build authority 'within' individuals and increase leadership capacity and capability at all levels. This frees everyone to work at their full potential, creating increased efficiency, effectiveness and motivation. The way that leaders do this and how they engage with staff sets the climate of the organisation and will either promote trust and innovation or reinforce rigidity and resistance to change. This sounds like common sense but is in fact deeply countercultural in the public sector.

The erosion of individual responsibility and trust has a significant financial implication. Dependency, a lack of discretionary effort and an unwillingness to take risks means that at best you maintain the status quo at worst standards fall and clients suffer. The art of leadership is getting the balance right between control and freedom. The challenge is that when under pressure people usually revert to command and control. What is needed is a process that contains the anxiety of the leader and those engaged in the change so that real work and innovation can take place and ideas are allowed to flourish (see diagram above).

What I am advocating is not revolutionary change but evolutionary change through experimentation and

## Change at City College Norwich – a case study

*“We want our staff to be informed risk takers, collaborative, entrepreneurial and customer focused and our Change Team initiative is already making real strides towards achieving those goals.” Dick Palmer, Principal and Chief Executive. City College Norwich*

City College Norwich wanted to develop a 21st century workforce which was much more responsive to employers needs. They decided to have eight of their staff trained as facilitators so that they could deliver five change workshops themselves with the support of a consultant acting as a coach. The eight facilitators worked in

pairs with change teams of ten to fifteen people each, drawn from across the college. This enabled them to work on four sub projects and meant that sixty people were engaged in the process. The teams developed:

- Systems to enable staff to become more adaptive and flexible in their working practices
- A more collaborative culture where leadership at all levels demonstrated a high degree of commitment, belief and pride in the college and its vision
- A strategic, standardised and personalised college

induction that is effective, cohesive and moderated

- Processes in order to improve communication, recording and reporting as well as supporting the CPD appraisal system

The steering committee, which met three times, consisted of ten members including the Principal, Governors and three external partners.

*“We hoped that the programme would be a methodology for enabling the College to achieve the aspirational aims we set out in our strategy. Well, we’re not disappointed!” Dick Palmer, Principal and Chief Executive*

## The focus of leadership

**Moral imperative** – Why should we change?

**Sponsorship and governance** – Who feels strongly about this?

**Vision** – Where do we want to be?

**Blind spots** – What is going on under the surface?

**Impact** – How will it be?

**Planned delivery** – When will change be sustainable?



## The focus of the change team

learning by doing. Control, discipline and alignment of goals are extremely important but not to the extent that they sacrifice creativity. A certain level of failure and a great deal of trust is the price that has to be paid for innovation.

Inevitably when cuts are deep there is uncertainty and fear. But having a process that promotes transparency and honesty is essential. This is often a time when leaders retreat to their offices rather than leading from the front. Supporting staff to develop a shared view of the future, encouraging the analysis and benchmarking of performance and giving them the opportunity to introduce new ways of working can have a profound effect.

I don't believe you can learn about leading change from a book, you have to actually do it. However, it is commonly acknowledged that up to eighty percent of change initiatives fail and the reasons for this have been well documented. Such a high failure rate means that existing ways of managing change do not address these reasons.

The approach that I have found to work, and which I have refined with others over the past decade, develops leadership and changes ways of working. The

six step process uses tools and techniques that, rather than being prescriptive, allow organisations to tackle their challenges in the way most appropriate for them (see diagram above).

The approach ensures changes are based upon evidence, have a measurable impact and are sustainable. Its highly participative nature means that the motivation for change and the skills to bring it about are distributed throughout the organisation and whole system.

### Bringing about systems change

Over the past decade I have been refining an approach to workforce reform and modernisation that has proved itself in many settings both in the UK and overseas.

Schools, hospitals, social services and other organisations realise that structural and financial changes mean they have to do things differently. This is a once in a generation opportunity to really change the way the public sector is led, works and thinks about itself and its role in society. Without help I am concerned that they will miss this chance and we will end up with less rather than more for less.

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■ Pat Collarbone taught for 28 years in inner London and established a reputation for innovation and achievement during her headship of a secondary school in Hackney. In 1996 she established the London Leadership Centre at the Institute of Education, University of London. She has been Director of Leadership Development Programmes at the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) and the Executive Director of the National Remodelling Team (NRT) and the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA).

Pat is an acknowledged expert on educational leadership development and workforce remodelling and has advised the Department, NCSL and TDA. In 2000 she led the development of the National Qualification for Headship (NPQH), now a mandatory qualification. More recently she has been working on a remodelling and leadership project in the Further Education sector. She is the author of the book 'Creating Tomorrow: Planning, developing and sustaining change in education and other public services'.

Pat received a DBE in 1997 in recognition of her services to education.