Key challenges facing public sector leaders: themes from the Ashridge Public Leadership Centre essay competition 2007

2007 saw the first Ashridge Public Sector Essay Competition with a large number of entries from around the globe. Carina Paine Schofield draws out key themes from the entries and presents an overview of the issues that are at the top of the agenda for public sector leaders around the world today.

Background
In 2007 the Ashridge Public Leadership Centre (APLC) ran an essay competition in partnership with Guardian Public on the theme of leadership and public service. The aim of the competition was to bring fresh insight and understanding to the debates surrounding leadership in the public sector.

Essays were invited on one of three topics:
- Challenges facing leaders in the public sector
- Changing relationships between citizens and those working in the public sector
- Examples of successful work in the public sector.
The majority of the authors focused the topic of their essays on the public sector in the UK, although the competition did attract entries from around the globe. Entrants worked in a variety of sectors (local government, central government, and the educational and charity sectors), which was reflected in the range of evocative stories and gritty case studies featured.

This article summarises the key themes emerging from the essays, predominantly focusing on the challenges facing leaders in public services and their authors’ suggestions for overcoming them. Essay authors are referred to throughout, and where their views are supported by other published literature these references are also included. Each of the authors mentioned is listed at the end of the article.

Almost all authors described this challenge. Their description is reflected in the published literature, where many definitions of ‘leaders’ and ‘leadership’ now recognise ‘change’ as central to a leader’s role. For example: “Leadership… is about coping with change…. more change always demands more leadership”.

In particular, several authors refer to the fact that the public sector is currently entering a significant era of change. For example: “Leaders in the public sector are having to deal with accelerated change: facing new pressures to learn and innovate to keep up” (Moses Kibe Kihiko). Carole Edwards eloquently states: “Change is not, in itself, anything new; it is the increasing pace of change that is significant in our time”.

This, however, is not an area that is unique to the public sector. Uncertainty and change are common themes in all management and leadership literature, but it is perhaps the historical sense of a lack of change that has occurred in the public sector pre-1970s in the UK that exacerbates the pace of change as a current issue for the sector. The ability to cope with uncertainty and change is both a dispositional and capability issue, and requires development focused on strategies to manage change, as well as strategies to manage yourself when going through and managing the change of others.

### Key challenges facing public sector leaders

- Increasing pace of change
- Technological developments
- Changing perceptions
- Increasing expectations
- Citizen empowerment
- Changing workforce
- Changing environment

An increasing pace of change in the public sector

Many entrants spoke of the relentless pace of change in the public sector. An extract taken from *Alice in Wonderland*, described as the Red Queen Effect, illustrates this issue:

_Alice meets the Red Queen running on the spot, and getting nowhere. Alice runs alongside her and says: “In my world, we run to get somewhere” to which the Red Queen replies: “Oh no, here you have to run as fast as you can just to stay in one spot. If you want to go somewhere, you have to REALLY run!”_

Authors specifically make reference to the wide ranging impact ICTs are having on leadership in the public sector. As part of his agenda for stronger performance achievement, Kenneth Okpomo describes the importance for public sector leaders to “establish consistent and effective training policy for their human capital to keep them abreast of the latest technologies and innovations”.

Questions raised by authors include: Are public sector leaders ready for what these ICT changes mean in terms of engaging with society? Can leaders keep up with technological trends as a way of interacting with society and engaging employees? How will technological changes impact on how public services are organised, on how services are delivered to citizens, and on how citizens can contribute?

Technological change in the public sector is a particularly topical issue, and the authors’ descriptions reflect the views of a vast amount of published literature, which describes how the rapid pace of technological change is having a wide ranging impact on how public services are organised and how services are delivered to citizens (for example). The vital role played by technology in the public sector is now enshrined in the annual e-Government National Awards (see [www.PublicTechnology.net](http://www.PublicTechnology.net)).

Again, this is not an issue that is isolated to the public sector. The private sector is also adapting to the fact that the net-generation is growing up with ICT, with everyone’s children being far more computer literate than they are. Across the sectors it may be most useful to view ICT as an instrument of change, an enabler, rather than as a barrier. Discussions on ICTs should focus on how they can be used to benefit public services, which is what the current eGovernment strategy vision describes as: “Better using technology to deliver public services and policy outcomes that have an impact on citizens’ daily lives”.

Changes in public perceptions

DeePA Sundaram describes how e-governance has become yet another feature of modern governance. She...
describes facilities for citizens, such as online payment of tax, availability of information on public service recruitment, public procurement of goods and services which “help in reduction of opacity and enhancement of transparency of governance”.

A recurring theme throughout the majority of essays is the transparency of public services, and particularly how this affects public service leaders. This is attributed to the technological developments which mean that society is monitored by the media 24/7. For example the public, equipped with cameras in mobile phones, are increasingly becoming ‘citizen journalists’.

As a result of such coverage, leaders in this sector have seen their public profile increase in recent years. Several authors describe the resultant changes in the public perception of leaders. One more extreme example being: “Once taken as a hero, a leader is in fact seen as a villain”. Essays also relate how the media has reduced leaders’ privacy: “It is no longer clear what is private and what is public in the life of a leader” (Moses Kibe Kihiko). Marianne Young goes on to describe how this has impacted on the confidentiality of relationships between public servants, politicians and citizens: “This is leading to increasing exposure and scepticism between all parties and a growing absence of confidence in the ability of public servants and politicians to deliver”.

The exposure of public sector leaders, most often seen within the NHS in the UK, has contributed to a talent crisis in the NHS such that there is a shortage of applicants for hospital chief executive positions and leaders of health authorities. People are reluctant to be promoted to these kinds of roles as if they perceive the risks to them personally as being too great. Senior civil servants are also finding themselves in the public eye with regard to document production and interpretation, and the number of ‘leaks’ that stem from Whitehall.

Changes in public expectations and personalisation

Authors also note changes in the behaviours of the people public service leaders lead: the citizens. Citizens as a group are becoming an increasingly complex and diverse population, with growing, shifting and contradicting expectations.

Authors describe how such changes in behaviours have occurred predominantly because citizens may now view themselves as ‘private consumers’. For example: “There has been a shift in citizens from that of passive consumer to an expectation for a more customer led model of public services” (Sharon Squires) and “There is a greater expectation from the public that Government agencies will provide a level of service comparable to that of the private sector (in terms of service, personalisation and choice)” (Karen Mau and Maria Katsonins). These thoughts are supported by published literature: as awareness and use of technology grows there is an increasing expectation from the public that Government agencies will provide a level of service comparable to that of the private sector.

Several authors specifically refer to citizens’ increasing need for personalisation: how “citizens are no longer satisfied with one size fits all solutions to service needs” (Karen Mau and Maria Katsonins). For example, Janine Miller states: “What leaders need to really understand is that public services need to be able to be tailored to the needs of each individual member of society. And this needs to happen virtually”. Janine goes on to suggest that “public services will need to change their websites to become far more interactive, offering options but also freedom of movement between options”.

Tim Harle describes a key challenge for public service leaders as having to live with both ends of a ‘commodification-personalisation’ spectrum. In order to do this, Tim describes the need for a move “from e-government to i-government” explaining that “the iPod generation expects personalised service delivery” which he describes as echoing the “individual-collective trend”; “If you have Your M&S, why not My NHS?”

The public sector has always provided services to individuals, and always dealt with individual queries. However, personalisation has gone beyond this and has developed into something new. Truly personalised services would enable users to be involved in what services are delivered, and how they are delivered. In this way, personalisation has been described as “this Government’s equivalent of privatisation”.

Citizen empowerment

Authors acknowledge the role of information technology in changing the relationship between citizens, politicians and public servants. They describe how ICTs are creating a more networked society, enabling greater collaboration with citizens. There is already a large amount of user generated content which is publicly available – for example, in blogs and forums, patients looking up health information online, citizens signing online petitions (as in www.petitions.pm.gov.uk). This is having a wide ranging impact on how public services are organised and services delivered. For example, citizens are being given the opportunity to take an active role in identifying both the issues for their neighbourhood and potential solutions (as in www.fixmystreet.com).

Many authors go on to describe the move away from passive consumerism to detailing what they refer to as ‘citizen empowerment’ – where citizens play a more active role in the shaping and delivery of public services. Authors predict how this is likely to grow over the next five years, mainly due to ICTs changing the provider-user relationship.

Ann Walker echoes the published literature in stating how advances in information technology have changed the way information is gathered and used: a wide variety of information data is now collected with increasing frequency and in different
Carole Edwards expresses how leaders need to be able to cope with an “increasing turnover of staff, particularly those with marketable skills, on the one hand; while helping the longer-term generations – who still hold traditional public service values, such as ‘a job for life’ – to become more resilient to change”. She goes on to describe how “in time, the ‘industrial age generations’ will disappear through natural evolution, but meanwhile, leaders will have to get the best out of a workforce with natives of two different ages – the industrial age and the information age – who embrace very different philosophies and work ethics”.

The rejection of the ‘job for life’ concept by younger employees may well bring about changes that drive the future development of public services: introducing more competitive orientated and performance focused careers.

A changing environment
A number of authors refer to leaders having to contend with a changing environment, and how challenges faced by leaders today and in the future are not confined to those of national origin or impact. Again, this is a key topic identified in the literature in general, where taking an international perspective when looking at public service issues is increasingly emphasised.

Numerous essays specifically refer to the impact of globalisation. For example, Moses Kibe Kihiko describes the key challenges leaders will face over the next five years as those of: change; expectations; and complexities. Moses specifically talks about the challenge of “globalisation complexities in the global scene and in trade and markets” and describes how “what is happening in one corner of the globe is affecting everything else”. Moses states that “these challenges will become more complex over the next five years and will have a direct bearing on leaders”.

Another example is made by Alice Poole who describes disasters and migration as major challenges for public sector leaders which are likely to increase over time. She explains how both sets of challenges are “complex, demanding high levels of analysis at multiple levels, as well as courage in the face of high odds of failure. Yet there is hope: successful engagement of these two issues could severely minimise the impact of disasters and embrace a migration policy that supports macroeconomic growth as well as local cohesion. It would also prove the calibre of the public sector and its leaders in tackling critical issues both now and in the future”.

Several essays also refer to economic challenges, and specifically the significant challenge of how to achieve more with less. This challenge also features in the literature: “The resources needed to cope with the increased demands have, typically, been far less readily available in [the public sector than the private sector]. So public sector managers have to manage with what they’ve got”.

Colin Palfrey refers to the economists’ dictum ‘infinite demand but finite resources’: “It’s undeniable that resources – and that boils down to money – are exhaustible…. but we can, perhaps, do something about ‘infinite demand’”. Colin describes how “there are things that public sector leaders can control and other things that they cannot” and he emphasises the importance of identifying the difference between the two: “By concentrating on things beyond their control, leaders can waste funds”.

How leaders need to respond
The need for a new type of leadership
Several of our authors progressed from cataloguing challenges to proposing solutions of how such challenges should be tackled and/or providing recommendations of where public sector leadership should be
heading over the next five years. In particular, authors refer to the need for a new type of leadership, which incorporates the skills and qualities that leaders will need in order to respond to the challenges listed and to improve public service. Again, such discussions are accompanied by similar ones in the published literature, which describe the need for models of leadership in the UK public sector to be updated to reflect the new challenges faced by Government (see, for example10).

Many authors began their essays by describing the problems of defining leadership. A search of the published literature in this area supports their views: unsurprisingly there is no single agreed definition of public sector leadership. Despite the lack of a single definition some generic dimensions to public sector leadership can be identified by the current discourse in this area which makes use of the terms: collective (shared / distributed) leadership; collaborative leadership / partnership working; adaptive leadership; and transformational leadership. The discourse used by authors when documenting how leaders should respond to the current challenges neatly reflects the discourse used in published literature. In particular, authors describe the need for a fully inclusive form of leadership to account for the increasingly active role citizens are playing in the provider-user relationship.

Authors also refer to the need for transformational leadership (rather than the notionally traditional transactional leadership) to enable organisations to deal with the many changes detailed. Some authors go on to develop this further and discuss the need for flexible / adaptable leaders, who need to be both transformational and transactional at different points in time. Authors Karen Lau and Maria Katsonis describe such a form of leadership as having a mindset that is responsive to immediate issues and has the foresight to look over the horizon. Author Jane Midgely provides a detailed example of such leadership in the fire service, where there has been a sea change in focus from response to prevention.

Several authors describe how the dialogue between public sector leaders and citizens needs to be characterised by collaboration. Collaborative leadership (and partnership working) has been described elsewhere in detail in the published literature (see, for example10). Ewart Woolridge specifically calls for those who run public sector leadership centres to respond to the call coming from a major research led debate on the need for better developed cross-sector leadership skills in the public services (see www.publicleadership.co.uk).

The basis of these leadership styles is largely dispositional. Gone is the autocratic leader who rules with a iron fist, and what they say goes. Instead we see a model of leadership that is collaborative, inclusive and yet visionary. Such a disposition towards leadership can be developed, but is assisted by an underlying intrinsic sense of preference to work this way if future leadership requirements in the public sector are to be met.

**Building relationships and trust**

A prevalent topic throughout the essays is that of how to build and sustain trust. In terms of recommendations, a number of essays refer to the need for accountability and integrity, with leaders being more visible, approachable and communicating with followers openly and fairly. Marianne Young describes how leaders’ willingness to be visible (both internally within public sector departments and to the wider world) will assist with understanding and help rebuild confidence and trust between all parties (citizens, public servants and politicians). Again, trust is a topic that is also prevalent in published literature which described how essential it is that leaders in the public sector are ‘transparent’ and ‘open’ and for leaders to be clear about their purpose and act this out with integrity11.

A few authors describe the specific need for leaders to build relationships and trust with their communities. Alex Stobart explains the need for leaders to reach out and blend different groups into a sense of shared community and to deliver outcomes for their community. Sharon Squires, author of the winning essay, argues that instead of being managed centrally, leadership of local public services should build strong and responsive political leadership and public service delivery. Using a local case study example, she demonstrates how this is based on community leadership and active citizenship, involving dialogue, collaboration and consensus.

This type of engagement in itself achieves the aim of establishing and building trust. Being open and honest in asking for opinions, and available to listen to people’s ideas, models the desired environment for collaborative public leadership.

**Innovators and entrepreneurs**

Several authors refer to the need for the public sector to attract and support innovators and entrepreneurs in order to develop and improve public services. For example, Penelope Tobin describes the importance of ‘soft skills’ which include entrepreneurship and innovation (as well as communication, teamwork and adaptability). Tobin explains how these skills have a profound effect upon motivation to change, willingness to engage, and enthusiasm for learning. Marcial Boo also describes the importance of entrepreneurs for the development of the public sector: entrepreneurialism from all public sector leaders – and not continued top-down, bureaucratic micro-management – will help the public sector move through adolescence into maturity.

Many authors stress the importance of support for the development of such skills. For example, Jeff Anderson describes how...
an innovative culture needs support from the top; public sector staff need to be rewarded for innovation. Jeff also refers to the power of the entrepreneur, the need for all public sector leaders to demonstrate determined leadership and entrepreneurship for improvement in public services.

The authors’ essays again reflect the published literature, which describes traditional bureaucracy as inflexible in structure, averse to risk and stifling innovation, and details the need for the breakdown of unnecessary bureaucracy and the development of a supportive environment in order for innovation to prosper in the public sector. The literature goes on to describe how innovation in the public sector raises additional issues compared to innovation in private sector services, particularly around managing risk when there is a low tolerance for public service failures. The public sector needs to foster innovation while managing risk.

What next?
The 2007 essay competition provided the APLC with the opportunity to capture the voice of practitioners in the field. Authors also found the competition useful, for example: “It was well worth spending some time on”; “The process (of writing an essay) has made me think about the wider issues and about my own practice, so was of practical value.”

Many of the reflections submitted to the APLC essay competition challenge some of the core issues at the heart of public sector provision, such as citizen engagement and empowerment, and the recruitment and retention of future staff. These are key areas that will need to be investigated in the future in order to take the public sector forward.

In terms of developing reflective practitioners, the APLC essay competition has clearly added to the field of knowledge. Following its success, the competition is being run again in 2008. Details are available at www.ashridge.org.uk/aplcresearch.

Acknowledgments
Thank you to both entrants and the judging panel for their valuable time and insightful observations.

Essay authors mentioned in text
Alex Stobart, Scotland
Alice Poole, Masters student, USA
Ann Walker, WEA, England
Carole Edwards, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, New Zealand
Colin Palfrey, Wales
Deepa Sundaram, India
Ewart Wooldridge, Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, England
Jane Midgeley, Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service, England
Janine Miller, England
Jeff Anderson, England
Karen Mau and Maria Katsonis, State Services Authority, Australia
Kenneth Okpomo, VGC Comms Ltd, Nigeria
Marcial Boo, Audit Commission, England
Marianne Young, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, South Africa
Moses Kibe Kihiko, Ministry of Transport, Kenya
Penelope Tobin, Barrier Breakers Charity, England
Sharon Squires, Derby Community Safety Partnership, England
Tim Harle, self employed consultant/lecturer, England

References