



'Room for improvement?'

A think piece

Patrick Scott, VSC Associate.

This thinkpiece draws on 'A conversation about improvement', one of a series of applied leadership seminars provided by the Virtual Staff College for Directors and senior leaders in children's services. In total, 7 DCSs, 9 ADs and a representative from Ofsted attended the seminar, which took place in January 2014. The seminar took the form of an enquiry into the way in which effective leaders improve outcomes for children and young people by establishing and maintaining high quality services.

Whether the challenge for a Director of Children's Services is to manage an authority out of post-inspection intervention or to take it from good to great, there are four domains or areas of activity which, experience suggests, are most likely to demand their attention as leaders. These are:

- Governance
- System design
- Culture
- Sustainability

Each of these makes particular demands on those in positions of power, both as leaders, and as individuals. The privilege of leadership brings with it a responsibility for taking risks and embracing discomfort. This thinkpiece examines each of those four domains in greater detail, and identifies a series of propositions directed at those that influence and determine the policies within which services for children and young people are provided.

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1. Governance

It almost goes without saying that effective leaders are able to manage the 'authorising environment' successfully. Unless the DCS is capable of orchestrating the chorus of influential stakeholders, partners, staff and users with which they are surrounded then they are unlikely to have an impact of any kind, let alone add value or improve service delivery. For real improvement to take place the DCS needs to be able to do more than simply elicit support and manage expectations, they also need to be able to embrace accountability as a positive force for good rather than a burden to be endured. That is harder than it seems, because it involves taking a pro-active approach to governance. Compliance with regulation may keep you in the job, but it won't do the job.

The first line of governance is, of course, the local arrangement for holding the DCS to account. This is by no means as simple as it once was. Conventionally, of course, power and responsibility has rested almost exclusively with the lead member for children's services and the local authority executive or cabinet. The more recent emphasis on the responsibilities of the Local Safeguarding Children's Board and the powers of the independent chair, have created an alternative locus of power within the system. The local Health and Wellbeing board is also in a powerful position to influence local decision making, and many local authorities maintain a scrutiny committee devoted exclusively to services for children and young people.

Despite its protestations about local decision making, central government also continues to play a significant role in the governance of children's services, both directly through the DfE and, indirectly, through Ofsted. Local Authorities in intervention are typically required to appoint improvement boards, and most national initiatives still come with reporting requirements that require high levels of compliance. There is, as one participant at the seminar put it, a danger that it will all become 'a spectator sport' as DCSs pick their way around an obstacle course that may be the test of whether they are going to keep their jobs.

Those that manage this successfully:

- have the courage to acknowledge publicly what is and is not working whilst maintaining a **culture of trust and open behaviour**. One contributor to the seminar talked about 'no blame, no hiding place',
- are able to create a **single, unified system of accountability** that promotes practice improvements in direct work with children and families. The key to this lies in clarifying and maintaining clear boundaries between different regulatory bodies whilst ensuring that there is a single, streamlined, process for business support, and that the demands on officers are not duplicated,
- have **the strength of character to make their own demands on the system**, and the resilience required to ignore orthodox solutions where they are not appropriate. The seminar heard from a DCS who was absolutely clear about what he would and would not accept when taking on a leadership role across the system, and another who had the courage to challenge those that were holding her to account inappropriately,
- **are capable of weaving a single, convincing narrative about improvement**, and not follow advice, even when it is perfectly sound, that is inconsistent with the way in which the authority is being moved forward,
- **are able to anticipate policy developments**, and make well-judged decisions that may only be more widely accepted when they are viewed with hindsight.

The qualities that leaders need to achieve this are:

- Courage
- Disciplined attention
- Lucidity
- Self confidence
- Independence of mind
- Insight

A proposition:

There is a need for a review of the demands made on DCSs, by both local and national government in order to ensure that they are reasonable, proportionate and fit for purpose. This needs to take account of the way in which the role of the DCS is changing, and uncertainty about the expectations of the DfE in areas such as school improvement, so that roles and responsibilities are clear, and governance arrangements are transparent and simple.



2. System design

Although participants at the seminar were absolutely clear that structural solutions, by themselves, are highly unlikely to lead to an improvement in outcomes for children and young people, they also recognised that skill in designing systems is essential if change is to be handled as an opportunity rather than a threat.

Few, if any, DCSs have the luxury of operating within a stable world in which the rules of engagement are clearly understood and universally observed. Quite the opposite is the case. Through the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Cabinet Office, as well as the Department for Education, central government is increasingly promoting new models for service delivery. In local government, restructuring has become a routine occurrence, rather than an occasional big event, and Ofsted is setting an agenda that it may not be easy to reconcile with local circumstances. The experience of DCSs is that constant structural change distracts from the critical job of making improvements in the culture of the organisation or the way in which people behave, and can, at least temporarily, make matters worse. Be that as it may, service re-design continues apace.

A rigid adherence to a preferred way of doing business, however well conceived, is unlikely to be of much use to a DCS operating in this climate, which calls instead for increased flexibility and adaptability. It would, anyway, be foolish to imagine that there is only one route to improvement. That is not to say that any structure will do, or that the only thing that matters is the culture of the organisation. Some of the changes taking place are clearly having a positive impact, whether they are on a grand scale, such as local authorities working closely with each other to provide a range of joint services, or more limited in scope, when specific services are outsourced or spun off into mutuals or not for profit companies.

The seminar was quite clear that, although the temptation, during periods of change, is to retreat, taking refuge in doing what you know you can do well, it is important to remain open to alternative possibilities, and that means working closely with others facing the same challenges, particularly in the region. DfE funding may have been withdrawn from the national initiative on Sector Led Improvement, but the benefits of peer challenge and support are uncontested and sector led improvement needs to be a fundamental feature of the way forward. It is significant that Ofsted does not see an overlap with its own role in improving services and that there is a commitment to keep under review the boundaries between what Ofsted can do for the sector, what authorities might do for themselves and what they might need from others.

Those that are able actively to manage structural change so that it delivers improved services:

- are able to maintain a focus on outcomes, ensuring that **form follows function** and not the other way round,
- are well informed about the **full range of options**,
- have engaged with the region, look beyond their own local circumstances, and are able to understand and evaluate **the effectiveness of alternative ways of working**,
- are open to **learning from other related sectors**, such as schools or the health service,
- treat alternative models not as blueprints to be applied regardless of circumstances, but as a source of ideas for designing their own **local solutions**.

The qualities that leaders need to achieve this are:

- Open-mindedness
- Boldness and a willingness to take risks
- The confidence to conduct courageous conversations
- A strong commitment to collaborative working and systems leadership

A proposition:

Structural change should not be happening without any evaluation of its impact on children's services. There needs to be a full review of the impact of changes in the organisational structures of local government, and the effectiveness of alternative models of delivery. ADCS should take a leading role in this, helping to evaluate outcomes and identify the most effective improvement strategies. Local authorities should, collectively, be taking responsibility for maintaining the dialogue about improvement started by the Children's Improvement Board.



3. Culture

Since the publication of the Munro Report, it has become something of a cliché to insist on the need to establish a learning culture in order to make real improvement. The point needs repeating, however, not only because it remains true, but also because one of the most impressive features of improving authorities is the capacity of senior leaders to create the conditions for learning, even when they are under pressure to demonstrate regulatory compliance.

Eileen Munro went some way towards suggesting the defining features of a learning organisation by identifying the need for effective feedback ('double loop learning'), reflective supervision and the development of professional expertise. The seminar focused on the responsibility of DCSs to articulate and lead a 'pedagogy of improvement'. This phrase was intended to refer to all those things that happen in organisations on a daily basis, some as part of a planned programme and some spontaneously or instinctively, to ensure they will learn from experience and alter their practice accordingly.

A sharp contrast was drawn between working in this way and 'beating with a stick'. One group commented that 'a bullying culture does not generate insight or self knowledge (how do you know you are inadequate?)'. Few would dissent from this view, or from the belief that improvement is, above all else, about investing in people. The chief reason why this is difficult to do in practice is because it is not just about deciding what to do and making it happen, which is, of course, what most people assume to be the job of the leader. It is about distributing leadership more widely, to those that may not have seen themselves as leaders in the past, in the belief that they will rise to the challenge. One of the contributors traced the improvement journey in his authority back to the decision to establish a virtual school leadership college.

The obstacles to this way of working are all about whether those in positions of authority have the patience to play the long game. The reasons why the authority may demand results more quickly than seems reasonable are not all about political expediency, as is sometimes alleged. There is a very real argument that children and young people can't and shouldn't be made to wait for improvement in the services they rely on. If leaders are able to balance these competing demands, however, they can create the space and the trust required to undertake honest self-evaluation informed by the experience of staff and managers at the front-line. The importance of this is that it creates the conditions for good habits to drive out the bad, particularly if it is also accompanied by a clear understanding of what good looks like.

Those that do this successfully:

- tend to have a **strong ethical base for their work**, which 'runs like a spine' through the organisation they are leading. The significance of this is that it ensures that the decisions they take are not driven by vested interest or expediency, and it clears the way for learning to take precedence. As one participant put it 'this should be in the DNA of an organisation which has a responsibility for shaping other people's lives'.
- are likely to see themselves as serving the organisation, rather than being served by it. One participant referred to 'ubuntu' or **servant leadership**. Leaders like this see themselves as ultimately dispensable, successful when they are no longer needed.
- welcome **upward feedback**, seeking out uncomfortable truths, and acting on what they are told.
- ensure that **peer challenge** is a regular aspect of the work of the organisation, either within larger authorities or between smaller ones,
- behave in a way that exemplifies the values they extol, **modeling good practice** by demonstrating what it means to learn from experience, and seeing conscientious error as an opportunity to improve rather than to attribute blame.
- **trust and are trustworthy**, creating the conditions in which people open up rather than cover up.

The qualities that leaders need to achieve this are:

- Humility
- Honesty and authenticity
- Self knowledge
- Self belief
- A strong sense of principle
- Patience

A proposition:

Over the last few years, schools have successfully shifted towards a model of improvement that relies on peer challenge and support, learning from each other. Without mimicking this, those responsible for the development of social work should be seeking to establish the capacity needed for front line staff and team leaders to be improving their practice by working more closely in partnership. This should be a feature of initial and continuing development programmes. We anticipate that ADCS and The College of Social Work will be developing models for social work practice improvement that promote greater professional responsibility and systems leadership.

4. Sustaining improvement

Perhaps the most important, and the most difficult, question to address in the attempt to understand more fully how services can be improved is about why, for some authorities, dysfunction seems to be the default position. Whatever is done, however accomplished the leadership that is deployed to meet the challenge and however generous the resources that are made available, sooner or later, problems reappear.

There is no easy answer to this. A powerful case can be made that “fixing” children’s services is not the right place to start. There’s little point in creating a more sophisticated approach to dealing with the symptoms. Resources would be much better employed tackling the causes – poverty, social fragmentation and the conditions that drive problems like abuse, neglect and poor educational attainment. Local government should be transforming places not just services. The reason why some authorities can’t sustain improvement, the argument goes, is that they are tinkering around the edges when they need to be looking at the whole system.

This is why there was widespread agreement at the seminar that the focus of attention needs to be on children’s services, not social work. As one contributor put it ‘we believe profoundly in the whole system for children’ and, in responding to a request to work with another authority, offered ‘to do everything or nothing’. It is also why so many authorities are attempting to change the relationship between what they do for children and young people and what communities should be doing for themselves. The problem is that there are very few examples of what this looks like in practice. It’s easy enough to cite ‘adaptive leadership’ as a reason for ‘handing back the work’ on the grounds that you can’t wave a magic wand over ‘wicked issues’, altogether more difficult to know who you should be handing it to.

Despite this, there is a belief, within the sector, that some improvement journeys are more sustainable than others and that some kinds of leadership are more likely to leave a legacy than others. The seminar cautioned against importing successful models from elsewhere (‘There is no magic bullet’), on the grounds that difference is real, and local circumstances need bespoke solutions. What’s more, moving out of intervention may require a very different approach to moving from ‘good’ to ‘outstanding’. If good ideas are to be replicated, they need to travel with nuance.

So, those that manage this successfully:

- instill an approach based on **disciplined attention to the right things**, focused on need, using reliable data to inform honest self evaluation and support targeted interventions,
- put a premium on **user participation** so that ownership is widespread and not hoarded by any single person or organisation,
- are very **good at telling the story** of the locality and the journey that it has been on, so that it becomes part of a shared history that is widely accepted by all those who have been involved,
- create **managerial stability**, so that the story of the place is handed on and there is no break in the narrative as one person succeeds another,
- value **reflective enquiry** and view supervision as both a right and a responsibility,
- make **commissioning a positive choice**, by focusing on outcomes and using the process to reassert the values that underpin the collective endeavour.

The qualities that leaders need to achieve this are:

- The capacity to see the big picture and think strategically (Systems thinking)
- A sense of urgency about improving outcomes
- Honesty about the limits of their influence
- The ability to be reflective without losing momentum

A proposition:

The sector needs to reassert its belief in the whole system, establishing a *framework for improvement*, based on formal research and other forms of evidence, which puts a premium on the quality of outcomes for children and young people, places children’s services within the wider social context and provides a way of generating effective challenge to the status quo.



5. Conclusion.

It is now 10 years since the Children Act 2004, and the sector is facing the possibility of further significant upheaval in the provision of social care and education and it is by no means clear whether the DfE, ADCS, Ofsted and other key partners such as The College of Social Work (TCSW) are all pulling in the same direction. We believe that the lessons learned from this seminar should inform the process of change, and that the sector should give serious consideration to the propositions developed by the group.

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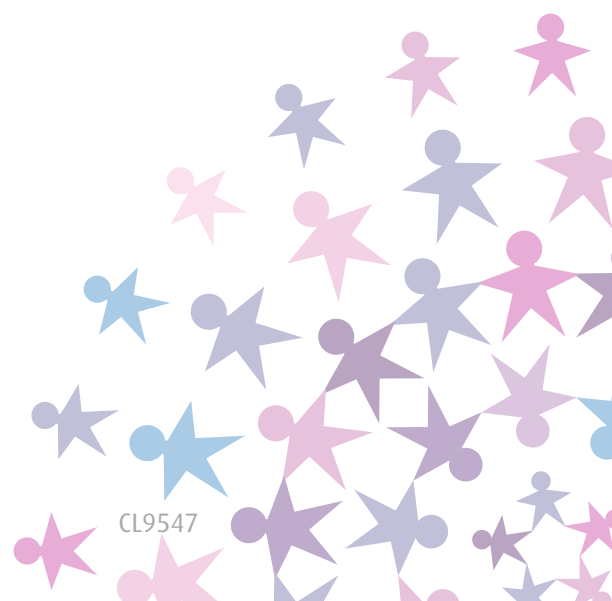
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Sir Colin Campbell Building
Triumph Road
Nottingham
NG7 2TU

T: 0115 7484126

E: dcsladership@virtualstaffcollege.co.uk

www.virtualstaffcollege.co.uk



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