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The new frontier

David Archer and **Alex Cameron** argue that public sector leaders are bringing together interconnected groups to deliver results across traditional boundaries.

There has never been a more important time for senior managers in the public sector to learn the skills of collaborative leadership. As a nation we are betting the future of public service on our ability to deliver results across boundaries. Examples are everywhere. We are committed to rebuilding our public transport infrastructure (and most of our schools) through a series of public-private partnership deals, delivering community health and social care services through multi-agency Local Strategic Partnerships, and tackling global problems of climate change and terrorism by constructing complex inter-governmental alliances. These efforts all rely on managers who can share control and sustain collaborative relationships.

Being a collaborative leader isn't easy—especially when resources are short. Human beings are essentially tribal animals. The traditional thing to do when times are tough is to circle the wagons and protect your own people. But today the challenge is to do the opposite—to look outwards at your key relationships and marshal a coalition of different groups to build creative solutions which meet public need under tight financial constraints.

At its most basic, collaborative leadership is about sharing control, handling conflict and creating value from difference. Experience, and much research, shows there is no single recipe to follow for a collaborative leader. However, there are a number of attributes of successful leaders that can form the basis of the assessment and development of collaborative leadership capability.

► **Patience:** Your direction may be clear,

but you need a flexible approach to getting there and accept this will take time. Collaborative leaders are patient with their partners and with themselves;

- **Collective decision-making:** Decisions made by leaders in isolation and enforced by hierarchical power aren't sustainable in today's world. Inclusive decision-making informed by bottom up data is key;
- **Quick thinking:** You need to be able to see opportunities and risks before others do, and act in response to them. This requires a quick intellect, and the confidence and courage to implement new ideas whilst taking people with you;
- **Tenacity:** The world we describe isn't a stable one. Governments come and go; dramatic events happen, and you cannot produce a detailed plan of action and expect to see it through step by step. Successful collaborative leaders are tenacious in the pursuit of results that deliver the overall common purpose;
- **Building relationships:** Collaborative leaders go out to find future partners, identify sponsors, make new alliances—and are prepared to do all this in unexpected places. They invest energy in doing this sort of networking activity ahead of time, so they can call on these relationships when the pressure is on;
- **Handling conflict:** Interdependent relationships are multi-layered and always contain seeds of possible conflict. Collaborative leaders don't see conflict as a mark of failure—rather it is part of the territory, and they are confident in holding the difficult conversations that help to bring about a resolution.

These attributes may not be the familiar leadership competencies, but they underpin success in today's collaborative world. You can assess them using 360° feedback, and you can develop them, in individuals by one-to-one coaching, and in groups by investing in collaborative leadership training programmes.

Traditionally, politicians and civil servants talk about their capacity to deliver change in terms of the money in their budget and the staff under their direct control.

While you can't transform public services without proper funding and dedicated programmes, a new model is emerging. This sees the world as a complex system in which a leader's role is to create the environment which brings interconnected groups together in a process of change, an environment in which people understand where they can act independently and where they must synchronise their actions with others, and ultimately, an environment which encourages the emergence of new solutions to some of the biggest problems of the day.

In a recent speech at the Royal Society of Arts, cabinet secretary Sir Gus O'Donnell said “one of a department's key capabilities is its ability to work across boundaries”. Measuring and developing collaborative leadership capability should be a large part of any public sector manager's task in the years ahead. **PSMI**

David Archer and Alex Cameron are authors of Collaborative Leadership: How to Succeed in an Interconnected World, recently published by Butterworth Heinemann. They are directors of Socia Ltd.