

How can senior public service leaders retain a focus on ethical leadership?

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An effective public sector leader is one who does not lose sight of their sense of a public service ethos.

Long-term trends and problems that public service leaders are facing are likely to challenge this.

New technologies and global challenges have the potential to create greater inequality in society.

Maintaining a focus on ethical leadership when making decisions will ensure that citizens are put at the centre of service design and delivery.

Public service ethos under threat

Research on the public sector workforce has found that they have a strong public service ethos, with most public servants choosing a career where they can make a difference in serving the public.

At the same time, however, there is also a sense that this ethos is increasingly being challenged as long term trends like digitalisation and climate change reshape the way public services are designed and delivered.¹

Given that their desire to make a difference probably contributed to their career choice, how can public sector leaders ensure that the difference they are making is the one

¹ Needham, C. and C. Mangan (2014), *The 21st century public servant*.

that they intended?

This piece reflects on threats to ethical leadership and considers where the opportunities are for leaders to reinforce the fundamental principles that motivated them to join the public sector in the first place.

Ethical dilemmas in modern public services

Digitalisation is often seen as a panacea for the challenges of delivering to a growing population, with promises of reduced costs, greater flexibilities and redesigned services around user needs.² But it is also increasingly well understood that digitalisation can exacerbate inequalities in life opportunity, education and income.³

Already examples are emerging of digitalised public services which appear to exclude vulnerable citizens. In Australia, for instance, the Online Compliance Intervention System, which was set-up to recover over-payment of benefits was found to have “compound[ed] the social and digital exclusion of a large number of already highly disadvantaged and vulnerable people.”⁴ The digital system used estimated the incomes of customers automatically if they did not respond to requests for information. This meant that anyone without internet access, a mobile phone, or who found the online portal confusing, was penalised by an incorrect income assessment, which triggered

² Barrett, M., et al (2015), '[Service Innovation in the Digital Age: Key Contributions And Future Directions](#)'.

³ Neufeind, M., J. O'Reilly, and F. Ranft, eds. (2018), [Work in the digital age: challenges of the fourth industrial revolution](#).

⁴ Park, S. and J. Humphry (2019), '[Exclusion by design: intersections of social, digital and data exclusion](#)'.

immediate activation of debt recovery processes without any ability to question the decision. In this way, a digitised approach created new problems for users because of the way it was designed.

Growing commercialism presents another risk. At the local level, for example, there has been a drive to increase commerciality as the central government grant has been cut. This has left 80% of English councils relying on commercial services to balance the books, creating some conflicts between public service and commercial sustainability. In one illustration of this, a UK council facing poverty, air pollution and obesity challenges introduced parking charges for all the city parks.

Unsurprisingly, climate change presents ethical challenges too. The impact of climate change in the UK has perhaps been highlighted most starkly by the decision of Gwynedd council in Wales to ‘decommission’ the town of Fairbourne as a result of the rising sea levels. Despite spending £7 million on protecting the town over the past decades the council decided it could no longer defend the homes from the rising sea levels and is implementing a plan to dismantle the town and re-settle the community.

There is no blueprint to follow for making a decision such as this, and no clarity about what the ‘right’ decision might be. Heatwaves, flooding, water shortages, potential of shortages due to extreme weather events – all of these challenges will test the ability of public service leaders to develop innovative, agile solutions that protect and enable citizens to support themselves.

Maintaining a public service ethos

In the face of such challenges, how can leaders hold onto their sense of public service as a guiding principle?

New Zealand has recently explored what it means to be a public servant in testing times; focusing on the need to cultivate public service ethos by fostering a ‘spirit of service’ which entails opening our ears and minds to the needs of others; an attitude of humility; and being motivated by something bigger than ourselves.⁵

In the UK, our leaders need:

- Strong integrity – to remain alert to the risks of inequality, discrimination and unequal access arising from new technologies.
- Humility – to recognise that they do not have all the answers, to test assumptions and learn constantly.
- A blend of commercial acumen with a service ethos and combination of entrepreneurial, creative and analytical skills.
- To create cultures that are centred around making a difference, with relationships and citizens at the heart of decision making

The NLC and its work could usefully focus on how we support leaders to protect their ‘spirit of service’ when facing global challenges with no clear solutions, and at a time when the debate may have shifted from ‘doing good’ to ‘doing least harm’.

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⁵ The Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG)’s 2018 Paterson Oration: [‘Peter Hughes asks how we nature the public sector ‘Spirit of Service’’](#).

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