

WHAT KIND
OF LEADERS
SHOULD WE BE?



A BETTER WAY OF 'LEADING' IN THE POST-COVID WORLD



By Nick Sinclair

Across all our discussions in the network, a new kind of leadership is emerging where:

- We become leaders not because we hold positions of power, but because we give power to others.
- We deploy the four Better Way behaviours to build connection and community beyond our organisations.
- We create the conditions for those at the sharp end to take more control.

But how can we counter the prevailing 'command and control' and managerial leadership model and make this newer style of leadership more widespread? Nick Sinclair, our thought leader for this line of inquiry, shares some ideas.

Throughout this pandemic we witnessed some powerful yet often quiet and unassuming examples of leadership emerging in our communities across the UK. Personally, this has offered me great hope and a reminder of the enormous power of people coming together to work with common purpose.

On the other hand, our classic leader identity seems to have taken a bit of a battering with many of our charismatic national 'leaders' displaying quite the opposite of what was hoped for.

During this time, we've also heard the growth of a narrative that leadership

is something to do with centrally commanding and controlling people and resources from the top. I find these behaviours and this narrative confusing and frustrating. Perhaps more worryingly though, I think it could be undermining the confidence of people to take up or embrace the leadership challenge where they are.

In contrast to 'charisma', 'command' and 'control', conversations in our Better Way Network have kept alive and proliferated a theory of leadership that is human, relational, adaptive, contextual and one that is focussed on achieving change through building power in others not by hoarding it ourselves. It is a theory that

recognises we all have the potential to be leaders of positive change (if we want to be), and it is the challenge of those who identify as leaders (of something) to help unlock that potential in others.

This feels especially relevant when thinking about the growing rhetoric we hear in society about our 'valuable' and 'vulnerable' people. I believe this to be unhelpfully divisive and something that needs to be tackled head on. Approaches like Local Area Coordination show what is possible when people come together to collaboratively design, cherish and protect the conditions required to turn this paradigm on its head and view people as leaders of their own lives and communities with gifts to share and contributions to make.

Creating the systemic conditions for things like Local Area Coordination to take root and flourish requires bravery and confidence on the part of those seeking to lead and catalyse such change. For these leaders this can feel especially hard (and lonely) at a time of crisis, particularly if they're feeling low on resources and energy themselves. This is why creating the space to share, learn and explore how this feels with peers is so fundamentally important.

Over the last two years I have been working with groups of 'social leaders' to create something called New Social Leaders (NSL). NSL is a broad leadership learning experience convened over a number of online sessions aimed at people who are

nominally in some sort of leadership role in the community or 'social sector'. Over a 100 people have so far 'graduated' so to speak and many have stayed connected through monthly gatherings.

One of the things I commonly hear from people joining is that they feel like an 'imposter' for some reason and that feeling is undermining their sense of agency to bring about change in their world. When we dig a little deeper what we tend to find underpinning this is an ingrained perception that leadership is something to do with this 'command and control' model with the charismatic person at the top controlling things, as I mentioned earlier. NSL groups explore this together by thinking about the values of 'leaders' who inspire them as a starting point. This helps to think of leadership more in terms of influencing, stewarding and creating the conditions for positive change through the application of those values. Interestingly what is often concluded by the groups is that we can all be leaders of something (just as much as we are all followers in different ways too).

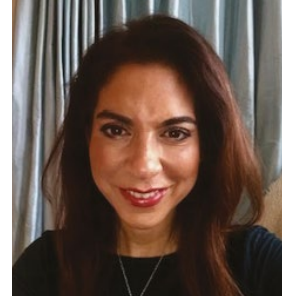
I wonder what would happen if we focussed our 'leadership' efforts less on commanding and controlling things (that are probably out of control anyway) and more on fostering a culture of curiosity that unearths everyone's gifts and potential? What would such a world look like and how might we get there? So far in the Better Way we think this can be achieved in some part through leaders who are:

- Giving power to others and helping them build it.
- Building connection and community beyond the limited sphere of their own work.
- Creating the conditions for those at the 'sharp end' to take more control, building relationships with those they serve.

One thing for sure is that we can move forward in these difficult times if we keep talking, sharing, building each other up and working through our challenges together. The Better Way Network remains one of the most impressive examples of this I have been involved with and I urge those who believe there must be a better way to join the movement!

Nick Sinclair works for Community Catalysts as the Director of the Local Area Coordination Network. He supports councils (and their partners) in establishing the approach and convenes a network of those who have already done so. He recently established a leadership learning experience called 'New Social Leaders'. Before joining Community Catalysts Nick worked for organisations supporting people facing homelessness. He is the founding chair of a small community food event charity in Tyneside led by people who are refugees and people seeking asylum.

MORE TRACY DASZKIEWICZS AND FEWER JAMES BONDS AS FUTURE LEADERS



By Nadine Smith

The new model of leadership set out in Nick Sinclair's essay requires new role models, as Nadine Smith explores here.

It is not often I get the chance to really indulge myself in TV but recently I was delighted to finally watch the most recent James Bond and the very gripping Netflix series, *The Salisbury Poisonings*. I have thought a great deal about what both said to me about the kind of leadership we need to maintain our resilience, strength and trust over a difficult and testing time ahead for all in public service.

While the public flock to see heroes like James Bond, busting through buildings and windows to save the world, leaving a trail of destruction behind them, I don't think that's what we need right now in public life. Rather, I think we need more people like Tracy Daszkiewicz, the then director of public health in Salisbury who was faced with an unprecedented public health crisis in her community but sought no fanfare in the way she protected the public. She had to rely on her relational skills to bring the community with her. At one point she simply said to an angry resident, 'Make me a cup of tea and I will tell you all I know.'

It is Tracy who shows being a public service leader in complex times means being a servant of the public in any circumstance. She makes top-down decisions quickly (because she needs to) but soon accepts what she does not know and admits that bravely and in public. It is central government in this scenario that sees indecision as weakness and swoops in, commanding and seeking to control, but Tracy continues to lean on her core purpose, drawing strength from her family and those impacted. She emerges an unlikely and reluctant hero after much self-doubt and personal sacrifice. There are many like Tracy who we do not notice across our services working like this every day and, more than ever, we need to enable them.

Tracy's leadership style however seems to still clash with today's performance management, measurement and commissioning methods, which in many ways seek false comfort in the unknown by trying to set down expectations on people, not with people, about what good should look like.

I hope that as we enter yet another difficult period where trust is shaken (and possibly stirred), we will see an emergence and celebration of more ‘servant leaders’ like Tracy. Servant leaders know their places, people and systems, they are curious, they seek out blind spots, not fame. They might need those they serve to create the psychological safety to enable their ideas to be heard and to be allowed to fail, as every ‘hero’ does. We will need to therefore help them to create spaces for listening and convening and bust not out of windows, but out of our echo chambers. We need to be asking who is *not* here and what assumptions am I making by excluding them?

Such self-awareness of one’s limitations has been a feature of the Appreciative Inquiry approaches that helped Plymouth to really get to know their community and serve their needs better with a whole system approach that is the Plymouth Alliance. Radical listening (as described in Karin Woodley’s essay) is also becoming a more familiar practice that serves leaders well, shows humility, builds relationships and empathy, as well as informs your strategy.

As leaders, we must try not to become obsessed with perfection but think about how we are learning and adapting to the ever-changing circumstances of people and places. You could even make learning your strategy, and central government your learning partner, as was done in Finland to reform education and as is being explored for health in Scotland.

An encouraging example I see of new ways of leading emerging in England is Changing Futures, a £64 million project (£46 million from the government’s Shared Outcomes Fund with almost £18 million in aligned funding from The National Lottery Community Fund) where areas are rethinking how they support those experiencing multiple disadvantage to live better lives. They are testing and learning new approaches and driving systems change. Those with lived experience are at the heart of decision-making that impacts on them. Approaches across local systems, governance and decision-making are trauma-informed throughout, understanding what happens when services are able to learn together and take a whole person, system-wide approach.

So, my suggestion is this. In your next performance interview, talk about what you have done to enable servant leaders like Tracy to emerge – let’s change the conversation about what successful leadership looks and feels like, let’s hear what communities think your leadership should look and feel like too. Perhaps then more Tracy’s, not James Bonds, will emerge – without the need for a crisis.

Nadine Smith is Director of Government and Enterprise at Social Finance and prior to that founded Nadine Smith Consulting.

LEADERSHIP AND THE PANDEMIC



By Stephan Liebrecht

How can we counter the prevailing ‘command and control’ and managerial leadership model and make a newer style of leadership more widespread? This is the key leadership question we are exploring. Stephan Liebrecht reflects on how the pandemic has tested existing models of leadership.

The last two years have been challenging for everyone who was involved in developing and delivering services in social care. There is no doubt in my mind that the Covid-19 pandemic has been and still is the single biggest challenge for the social welfare system since the Second World War. It remains uncharted territory, not only for me but for everyone around me too.

As an operational director in an adult social care service, I found myself confronted with these challenges from various angles. Here are just a few examples:

- Keeping local vulnerable people as safe as possible while the coronavirus is hitting these people the hardest.
- Enabling remote working for people who came into their jobs because they prefer to work with other people, offering compassion, dedication and building relationships.

- Enabling safe ‘face-to-face’ working in the community, supporting the most vulnerable people in often challenging circumstances where remote working is not an option.
- Keeping workers motivated, focused and resilient when they are unable to meet each other and their managers in person on a regular basis.
- Providing information and advice to the service about the spread of the virus and the benefits of using PPE and getting vaccinated whilst trying to follow national and local guidance that is often changing on a weekly basis.

Even after many years of being responsible for the delivery of social care services, the pandemic presented me with many new challenges, and I had to think again about my role as a leader.

So here are my reflections on what I found helpful over the last two and a half years. None of them are really new, but the pandemic gave them a different dimension and some of them a new lease in my working life.

First, the vision. It is important to have a good idea about how you think the services you are responsible for should be delivered. It's better if you can tell a compelling story about how and why you think this is the right way forward while keeping an open mind about the input others might bring to the party. During the last two and a half years I had to find a way to lead a service, write new chapters of our story and respond to the pandemic while working from the confinement of my own home for most of the time. It matters, and it makes a difference for those you are working with, when you can describe your ideas and plans for a better service. This doesn't stop being relevant, just because you find yourself in a crisis.

Minimise micro-managing. My own reflection of being at the receiving end of leadership is, that I find it most unhelpful when my decisions are constantly second-guessed and challenged or when (my) leaders are getting involved in the details of what I am trying to deliver. I experience this behaviour as disempowering. I thrive when leaders are investing trust and when they encourage me to explore ways to improve. On the other side I welcome constructive criticism and feedback. Working during the pandemic can feel removed from the services, and the instinct might be to increase control and to 'get a grip'. I found

that it is important to continue to invest trust in the people you work with and not fall back on to micro-managing to manage my own anxieties.

Over the years in management and leadership roles, I have experienced that people are most likely to work with me constructively and create better outcomes when they are included in decision-making and when I am fully transparent about the background of those decisions. I therefore very much like the idea that a leader is a 'primus inter pares' (Latin for first among equals). I am surrounded by experts in their jobs. As a leader I don't need to know it all or to call all the shots. I facilitate the journey, prepare the playing field and organise the resources.

Adapting to online working. Working remotely is not the same as sharing a room with the people you work and communicate with. Nothing can replace the experience of 'in-person' interaction. However, the virtual world created opportunities. Adding the chat dimension to a meeting that happens online for example makes the conversation richer and allows better participation. I was surprised how well even virtual job interviews worked. Virtual working reduces travel time and the carbon footprint too. I don't think I would want to fully return to the old meeting culture and I now advocate for a combination of virtual and in-person meetings.

Communication is everything. Not spending too much time in the same room with your colleagues and partners makes a difference when it comes to

communication. I tried to be personable even in remote settings, and I give time and space to other people for it too. I take my time to talk to people in all parts of the service.

Being authentic, being me. It's not easy to be myself in a leadership role. There are so many concepts of leadership, so many ways to define it, so many leadership courses are trying to give you the tools and techniques to be a great leader. I really don't want to dismiss them. The last months have reminded me that it is important for me and the people I work with that I don't lose myself in trying to be the image of a perfect leader. As a mature leader I learned that it is much better to be me, with all my flaws and qualities.

Stephan Liebrecht is a qualified social worker, social pedagogue, IT system engineer and music therapist. He qualified in Hamburg (Germany) in 1992 and has since worked in many settings. He moved to the London to work for an East London Local Authority in 2004 and joined Southend City Council as the Director of Operations in Adult Social Care in January 2022. He is a passionate social worker, musician and more recently also a grandfather.



WHAT I'VE LEARNT ABOUT LEADERSHIP FROM A BETTER WAY



By Laura Seebohm

Laura Seebohm gives her reflections here on what she learnt about leadership – and the new model of leadership we set out in Building a Bigger We – as the Better Way's Convenor for the North during 2021.

A Better Way is a collection of leaders committed to changing the way things work for people across society. The network gives us a rare opportunity to hear perspectives from a diverse range of leaders including grassroots activists, community businesses, people from public sector, private sector, politicians ... the list could go on. We come together as individuals rather than representing organisations and, as one member has said, try to 'get under the skin of so many of the more difficult issues with a group of amazing diverse and talented people.' This diversity gives the network strength and points to a new style of leadership which stands outside any hierarchy: the power we all have to make a difference and to give power to others.

It's not just who's in the network but where they come from that matters. During my working life it has generally been the norm for me to be the only person in a room who lives and works in the North – so many networks, conferences, think tanks were not only in London, but often had London services, practice, policy as the point of reference. It's such a loss, but the Better Way network has been trying to change this.

Zoom has been a game-changer. Ability to access these forums, though, is only part of the challenge of inclusivity. Relationships (as in everything) are key so, when the Power to Change gave funding to a Better Way that enabled me to spend time reaching out and building relationships across the North and Midlands, it has been instrumental in widening and deepening the Better Way Network, bringing in far more people from across England and also – importantly – more community businesses, which have a special knowledge of how to build connection and community beyond their organisations from which we can all learn.

We are all on a learning journey in the network. During my time as convenor for the North and Midlands over the past year, I have reflected on my years entrenched in first the public and then the voluntary sector, and how that has, to some extent, blinkered my vision. It was when I started convening meetings specifically focused on those of us living and working in the North and Midlands that my thinking about what is important in a place, what we mean by community, where leadership is found and, most importantly, who is included and who is marginalised has really evolved.

This is in part because of the rich conversations I have had with a range of community businesses which have been so inspiring, especially their immediate relevance and contribution when the pandemic hit – like Centre4 in Grimsby creating an app to join up local businesses and people in need during lockdown; like Heeley City Farm in Sheffield making sure people knew where their green spaces were and providing fresh food to children from wherever they came. As my Better Way colleague Steve says, ‘they are connectors, they empower, they are inclusive. They can be fast, generous and compassionate’. Community businesses are an integral part of the social infrastructure but they are too often ignored by government – local and national – who focus more on what they can control and commission.

The Better Way roundtables for the North and Midlands have been full of rich and challenging discussions on how we can give more power and control to people in local communities. Whilst so much place-based work going on is patchy and messy, the drive to do things differently is real. The big questions of how we can join forces to create conditions of trust, safety, build capacity and remove barriers so new relationships can emerge are being discussed across the country. It is no coincidence that so much of this is happening outside the South East, in our post-industrial cities, our rural communities and our coastal towns – those places for which the system is most broken.

What I’ve seen is the emergence of a new kind of leadership – a radical approach which is creative, innovative and increasingly supported by progressive

funding approaches. But this work is harder and takes longer than many of us might have hoped. We have to persevere and identify barriers with brutal honesty and transparency.

Above all, this change is personal, and that can stop systems change in its tracks. Many people are being asked to fundamentally challenge their mental models, deeply rooted since childhood in ways that try to avoid vulnerability, culpability, any suggestion of incompetency or blame – we are all deeply defensive. Only when we can be vulnerable, accept the need to take risks, do things that may fail, learn as we go along in conditions which enable reflection and compassion, can we really do the kind of deep work that is necessary.

I really believe that, at some point, so many parts of systems in so many places will reach a tipping point that change will come. We can’t fix all this at once and we certainly don’t have all the answers, but by joining forces, forging new relationships, sharing and building power and listening to each other in the sometimes unexpected ways that happen within the Better Way Network, we can ready ourselves. I am full of optimism for the future, and will keep, as said by so many in the network, going where the energy is.

Laura Seebohm was Executive Director at the northern charity Changing Lives, leading innovation and policy across the organisation, and also acted as our Convenor for the North (with support from Power to Change), until the end of 2021. She is now CEO of the Maternal Mental Health Alliance.