

# 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.

