

# 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.**