



# Exceeding Expectation: The principles of outstanding leadership

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With a seminar summary from:

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## Abstract

This article follows on from the interview with Will Hutton in the December 2009 issue of *The International Journal of Leadership in Public Services* (Davison, 2009) to give a more detailed outline of the results of *Exceeding Expectation: The principles of outstanding leadership*, a major piece of research undertaken by The Work Foundation and to explore the implications of this for the public sector.

## Key words

The Work Foundation; outstanding leadership; engagement; performance; systemically.

Some five years ago a piece of research undertaken by The Work Foundation, *Cracking the Performance Code*, looked at what the component parts of organisations were that achieved ongoing high performance. Among the outcomes was a distinct difference in high performing organisations in terms of how they approached leadership. Theirs was based on empowerment, distribution and engagement as opposed to a more hierarchical, controlling, micro management style. As a result, we commissioned a major piece of qualitative research to examine in more detail how leadership enabled high performance.

Seven private sector organisations sponsored the work of which six (Tesco, Unilever, BAE Systems, Serco, EDF Energy

and Guardian Media Group) took part, providing us with senior leaders to interview and, at a later stage, performance data relating to them. The research was both qualitative (in-depth interviews) and grounded (drawing from the information rather than setting out to prove a hypothesis). It involved 262 interviews including 77 leaders (two 90-minute meetings on their leadership practice and philosophy), plus interviews with their managers and direct reports. The organisational performance data was based on a range of hard task/project/financial outcomes and relational ones, for example 360 degree surveys, and enabled the researchers to group the participants on a scale of good to outstanding, and then explore any differences between the groups.

Our research team coded this extensive data and drew together a number of overarching themes that feature in *Exceeding Expectation: The principles of outstanding leadership*, the report published by The Work Foundation in January 2010 (Tamkin *et al.*, 2010). The focus for the report looked specifically at the distinctions between how good and outstanding leaders think and operate and has attracted great interest as an evidence-based piece of in-depth work in this particular area.

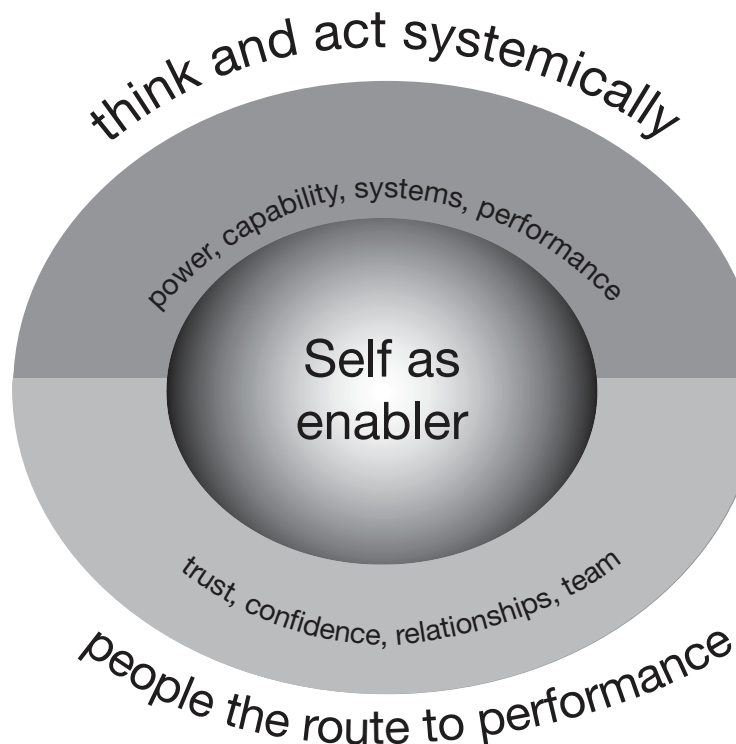
Interestingly, although this study is based on six private sector organisations, there has been much interest shown by public sector organisations, who see the findings as relevant to their situations and challenges. Following up with these organisations is attracting most of our time and resources at present. These have included workshops and presentations to UK Border Agency, Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS), Warwickshire Police, Foundation Degree Forward, the Ministry of Defence and others. Of particular note has been an event that we ran with the National Skills Academy for Social Care, from which a summary of the discussions and themes has been written up by Brian Cox as part of this article.

## The main principles of the research

Three overarching principles form the terrain on which outstanding leaders apply their philosophy and practice. We have demonstrated this in a model form in order to provide a focus for consideration, discussion, learning and to show the connectivity between these areas (see **Figure 1**).

‘Thinking and acting systemically’ puts outstanding leaders in a position of working at all times to enhance the ability of the organisation to serve its purpose. They understand that reaction follows action and are thoughtful about both the short and long-term implications of what they and others do and how they behave. They know that development and stretching people beyond what they may have thought possible unleashes energy and that empowering people both makes a difference and drives engagement. They have moved beyond arcane debates about the distinctions between leadership and management and are able to embody both seamlessly.

**Figure 1: Model of leadership: thinking and acting systematically (The Work Foundation, 2010)**



The level to which outstanding leaders see 'people as the route to performance' goes way beyond the traditional mantra of 'people are our greatest asset' and they will put massive emphasis on developing people for the long-term as opposed to being singularly task-focused. The task of leaders' is to build confidence, help people to be enthused, grow and develop people, create a trusting environment, engage and pass on power. By doing this innovation, improved quality, greater customer care and higher productivity will be achieved.

Right at the heart of the approach is the leader themselves who see 'self as enabler', yet it is vital to stress that they saw their role and responsibility as developing the collective leadership capacity and capability within the organisation. They understand that the difference they make is through the impact that they can have on others, and that this is not about personal ego but about the ability to reflect on themselves, on situations and on upcoming issues. They act to empower or develop the ability to influence in others.

Outstanding leaders act consciously and with a strong sense of self-awareness, respect and care for others. This is about enabling outstanding leadership to flourish throughout the organisation, not about vesting our hopes and futures in a privileged cadre of leaders supported by a devoted and inspired group of followers.

### Putting these principles into practice

Outstanding leaders do have a significantly different underpinning belief about how things should be approached. From the research findings, we have developed nine themes for leaders and organisations to consider how they think and behave and to consider when they are designing the supportive interventions and systems to allow collective leadership to flourish. **Figure 2** provides a summary of the themes, which we take in turn below and consider the implications of these for public service leaders.

#### I. Think systemically, act long term

Outstanding leaders are keenly aware of their symbolic role, even more so as they move to

**Figure 2: Nine themes of 'outstanding leadership' (The Work Foundation, 2010)**



be both distant and proximal leaders. They understand that a short-term action, such as briefing an individual, is about far more than getting the task done. It also impacts on the level of trust displayed, whether it acts to build the confidence of the person, how it may then be replicated as an approach by that person or by others who witness it, whether it reinforces the culture and values that the organisation espouses or aspires to and how it impacts in the long term as well as the short term. They are adept at not only providing a long-term vision but also at co-creating these in a meaningful way with their colleagues. They see the importance of this as a means of providing the 'why' for 'what' people do and as an underpinning touchstone for decision-taking as well as a source of inspiration.

Outstanding leaders think of their team as a wide group of partners and stakeholders, not merely the hierarchical group who report into them and the function or division. They see change as a way of being, not as a series of change programmes and initiatives, and above all they see their role as not to produce followers but to develop leaders.

## **2. Grow people through performance**

This moves well beyond the thinking of most good leaders and is both an underpinning belief as well as a rubric for action and behaviour. Outstanding leaders see their role as developing, trusting and empowering people. This involves making connections and opening opportunities for people to achieve in order to build confidence and capability that, in turn, will get long-lasting, high-level sustainable results. Their approach is much more one of coaching, nudging and facilitating rather than directing and telling, however charismatically done. They will offer and receive constructive feedback on both behaviour and performance and see this as part of the DNA in terms of a working environment.

A strong theme from the interviews was how successful leaders had often had one or more key individuals in their working lives who had put them in a position of great responsibility for a project or an area to a degree that the individual had not thought themselves capable. Demonstrating this

trust and confidence, stretching beyond the individual's self-limiting belief set and then supporting them with coaching and mentoring were frequently mentioned as a turning point in an individual's journey to develop their own confidence and abilities.

## **3. Talk is work**

Communication has, of course, always featured high in the list of must-dos for leaders. In this case the difference of emphasis between good and outstanding leaders is instructive. Outstanding leaders see opportunities in every interaction (known in physics as 'every contact leaves a trace') and use them not just to get things done but also to develop relationships, remove divisional or hierarchical barriers and create a climate of trust and openness. They create forums for dialogue in small groups, large groups and one-to-ones as well as structured informality such as 'walking the job'.

Rather than promote the 'open door' approach of many, which relies on others coming to the leader, they invest large amounts of time in effect to taking the 'open door' out to the workplace. Conversations go beyond checking on progress and tasks and are as much about gauging the mood of the organisation.

## **4. Put 'we' before 'me'**

This theme is all about developing the collective leadership in the organisation. There are times when the leader needs to take an upfront role and we came across many instances of senior leaders devoting huge amounts of time, thought and energy to dialogue via road shows and team meetings. This forms an important part of the leadership approach but as often leadership may be from behind, within or from a distance as the leader works to create an environment that supports and enables leadership at all levels of the organisation. Outstanding leaders recognise the depth of talent in people, which often remains under-utilised, and help to construct opportunities for people to play to their own strengths and feel a sense of ownership in their work, rather than working to others' plans. They invest time in helping to build a team of equals, bound together by their shared purpose and team spirit where they take delight in team success and collectively own any mistakes.

They are able both emotionally and practically to step back and allow people to perform rather than dive in to 'assist' or rescue in order to put things back on to the route they would like to see but at the expense of team and individual self-esteem.

### **5. Give time and space to others**

This theme is around the role that leaders have in helping people to focus on what are the key leverage points to support achievement of organisational purpose. In environments where there may be a raft of performance indicators and pressure to satisfy demands further up the 'chain of command', outstanding leaders help to protect colleagues from what Professor Mark Moore has called, '*hitting the target but missing the point*' (Moore, 1995).

A colleague of mine in the world of policing describes this as '*acting as radiators not drains*', in other words you can use organisational briefings and policies to enthuse OR brief them in a way that saps morale. This includes interpreting what and how to cascade performance and policy measures from above and being very clear in the formal and informal conversations with people what is the focus.

### **6. Bring meaning to life**

A very stark outcome of many of the interviews was the power of organisational purpose as a motivator and touchstone for outstanding leaders. This went well beyond the achievement of performance in terms of financial and project outcomes, which in the main were seen as givens – there to be achieved if not exceeded.

For instance it included customer service, supporting jobs and services in local communities, providing a major source of support for top quality engineering in UK plc, offering an independent liberal voice in the media. In other words, a strong sense of organisational impact and worth as well as the usual business plans and outcomes.

Outstanding leaders saw an important part of their role as seeing and maintaining connections to purpose for themselves, for their teams and in the conversations they have at work. Closely connected to the sense of an organisational vision, this put huge emphasis not only on having a sense of purpose but also to being able to help make it clear for everybody in the organisation how they impacted on it and to remind them of this frequently.

### **7. Authentic to leadership first, own needs second**

This theme was drawn from some really interesting distinctions in the difference of attitude and behaviour between good and outstanding leaders.

We found, for instance, that a good leader was more likely to be authentic to their own mood. So, for instance, they would justify this by saying '*I have an open and honest relationship with my team... if I am having a bad day and am in a bad mood its fine for me to display that in how I am*'.

An outstanding leader was far more likely to think about their impact on the atmosphere and on their colleagues and therefore to be thinking of their behaviour in leadership rather than personal terms. They would place consistency as an important part of the climate that they were operating in and consider the needs of the people who they were leading, rather than a slightly more self-indulgent approach.

Outstanding leaders had high levels of self-confidence without being arrogant. They were confident enough to consider feedback and to reflect and see the impact of actions and think about how things may have been done differently. We also found that in earlier stages of their careers, many of them had found reflection difficult and not task-focused enough, but through organisational support (360 degree feedback, coaching, mentoring) and personal practice had been able to build this not just into systems and routines, but also in to their very being as leaders.

### **8. Apply the spirit not the letter of the law**

The former CEO of First Direct Bank Alan Hughes has said on many occasions that '*values are more important than process*'. He immediately stresses that this does not mean process is not important but that it is values and how they are communicated and lived that will achieve engagement and high levels of customer satisfaction and performance.

Our research findings are in this vein. Outstanding leaders clearly see process as a tool to support engagement not as an end in itself. A good example of this in practice is to hear the difference in how good and outstanding leaders talked about regular performance reviews.

Good leaders would talk about completing the process to timescale, focusing on the review and measurement of performance objectives.

Outstanding leaders talked more about the quality of the conversation: did it build trust and confidence, was it open and real two-way feedback, to what extent did it further the engagement of the individual and give them a sense of ownership and empowerment in their work?

## **9. Take deeper breaths ... and hold them longer**

This theme speaks both to getting better results and to the development of confidence and abilities. Essentially, it also demonstrates in a very tangible way enormous trust being placed in the individual or team by the organisation. Essentially, it is about how outstanding leaders were not only comfortable with giving major responsibilities to people, but were also prepared to really step back and allow them to work through to good outcomes. Whereas good leaders saw failure as part of work and put their energy into minimising the likelihood of it occurring, outstanding leaders appreciated that failure will happen no matter how much time you put into it, and therefore you need to be able to work with failure to provide learning, experience and to have approaches that can be used to sustain and build confidence when it happens. In some cases in our sample, interviewees even let things continue when they saw that they would be likely to fail as they considered that the long-term learning and development would outweigh the benefits to be gained from stepping in to sort things out.

They were ever-mindful of their responsibility to build connective and collective leadership within the organisation and not just to be achieving a set of consequential tasks.

### **What does this mean for leaders in public services?**

There are many generic lessons that apply to any organisation and culture in terms of outstanding leadership and yet there are also particular emphases and challenges, not just to public services but to different organisations and even different teams within those organisations, which mean that individuals need to decide how they can best apply some of the principles and learning.

It is interesting that the enthusiastic response we have had from public service partners at The Work Foundation reinforces that they see things in these terms and are not stuck

in a 'that's private sector so it doesn't apply' mindset. Outstanding leaders are mindful of the culture that they are working in and adept at finding ways to work with this to embed their approach rather than taking it head on in a confrontational or 'maverick' fashion.

Within public services there are a number of themes that are often apparent in terms of leadership culture. These include:

- an emphasis on a myriad of performance measures
- swiftly changing priorities due to political decisions
- budgetary restrictions (clearly to be massive in the next few years)
- re-structuring (see above)
- changes in the psychological contract (fixed-term contracts, pensions, performance culture)
- hierarchy and a lack of empowerment
- deference to seniority
- increasing emphasis on a partnership approach
- increased recognition on the importance of EQ as well as IQ
- risk-averse culture due to (often negative) public scrutiny.

However the stated aims of most public service organisations in terms of leadership culture will align with many of the messages from the report, in particular regarding engagement and empowerment.

### **Outstanding Leadership, Engagement, Performance, Systemically – The Work Foundation and the National Skills Academy for Social Care Leadership Seminar**

**Brian Cox**

*Head of Leadership and Management, Skills Academy for Social Care, UK*

The Work Foundation hosted a highly successful leadership seminar for the National Skills Academy and the social care sector to consider the lessons learnt from the 'Outstanding Leadership' programme. As part of a year-long programme of leadership events created by the Academy, the seminar

was chaired by Will Hutton (Executive Vice-Chair of The Work Foundation) and attracted prominent leaders from the sector.

The reaction of seminar participants to the research was that it reinforced current understanding of successful leadership but brought greater clarity to the issues of enabling others to act. In particular, the illustration of how outstanding leaders act consciously and with a clear sense of how their presentation affects others seemed to be a fresh emphasis and important theme. The model emphasising, as it does, issues of empowerment and respect and care for others throughout an organisation seemed particularly attractive to the care sector.

The Work Foundation's model stimulated some lively and detailed debate. In particular, people were concerned with how such a model might be developed and supported in the current organisational and economic context. Issues of note included the following.

- At what point do we stand firm and support leadership development in an environment of retrenchment and service cuts?
- The regulatory environment may be used by leaders as an excuse to not empower/engage/trust staff/relax control and some managers may not have confidence to lead in this way.
- How far are care staff currently able to innovate? They need to be encouraged to use the skills and initiatives that they bring with them.
- How do you deliver these aspirations in organisations with a 35% turnover in key caring roles?
- We need a new approach to risk where risk-taking needs to be encouraged and not seen as career-limiting (current performance management frameworks are seen to be risk-averse).
- Our response to risk has been to invent more systems and demand conformance – this does not equal better care.
- To measure outstanding leadership we need to monitor and engage with outcomes for the users of services.
- We need to be courageous and brave and focus on outcomes for people – particularly at the moment where the prevailing feelings are fear, anger, anxiety and turbulence.
- The sector has good foundations – people join because of their values – but we need to ensure that positive values are reflected across whole organisations.
- Some of these leadership messages may resonate more easily in larger organisations compared with smaller organisations.

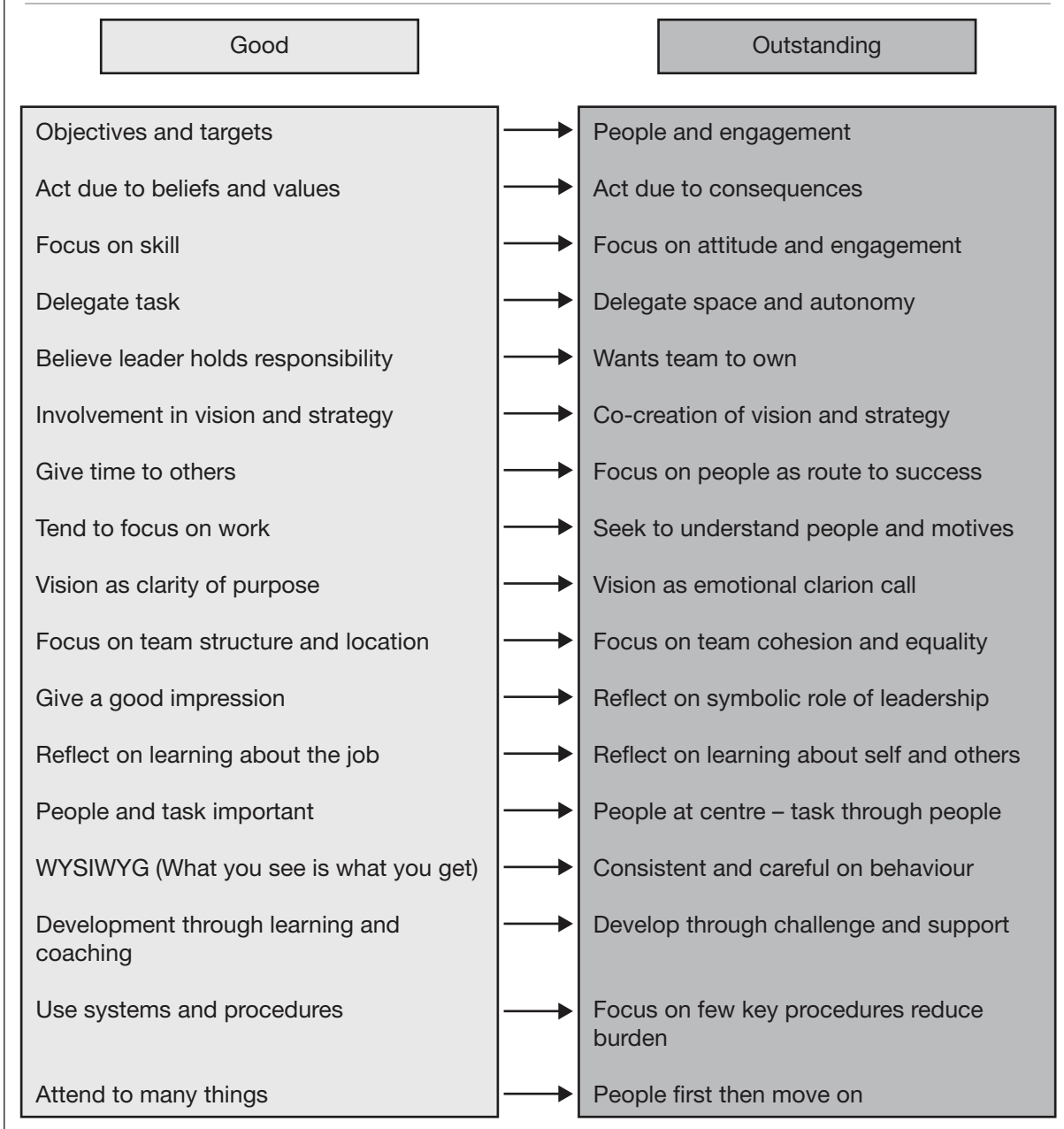
At the end of the event, Will Hutton drew the discussion together and offered his perspective on developing outstanding leadership in the difficult circumstances faced the care sector and by public services generally. Will suggested that current leaders:

- need to consider what social care leaders can do to shape the external environment
- need to be braver – stand up and say 'no' and offer alternative solutions
- need to hold to account those that hold you to account
- should recognise difficulties and work with them – some sectors will always shout loudest
- need a fresh attitude to risk – being risk-averse can be more risky than being positive and responsive
- should consider, as leaders, what messages are you giving about response to failure.

The seminar gave leaders across the sector access to fresh thinking and expertise from The Work Foundation and provided a positive stimulus for debate and thinking.

The National Skills Academy for Social Care is now working with The Work Foundation to extend this research programme in the social care sector and to test if there are differences in the required leadership attributes between sectors. The Work Foundation will be working with 15 organisations to explore the difference between good and outstanding leadership and will be making recommendations for how leadership can be further developed in the care sector. Our ambition is that we develop a leadership qualities framework for social care based on outstanding leadership in the care sector and beyond.

**Figure 3: Summary of the attributes of ‘good’ and ‘outstanding’ leaders (The Work Foundation, 2010)**



For individual leaders here are a number of areas to focus on and actions that can be taken.

- Using personal development reviews (PDRs) to develop not just plans for objectives and for individual personal development but also to shift emphasis to what is being done with individuals to develop collective leadership within the organisation.
- Developing open and constructive feedback both formally (within meetings, projects and at a one-to-one level) and informally with an emphasis on what works well and what can be done to do things even better in the future.
- Personally mentoring one or more people as part of your own and their PDR process. Building this around real

and stretching projects and behaviours to get them thinking in leadership rather than followership terms.

- Thinking through with colleagues if the purpose has enough clarity and goes beyond measures to reasons. Looking at how people can connect to it in a real day-by-day way and building this into conversations and briefings to remind people of it frequently.
- Personally demonstrating behaviours in all interactions (particularly upwards and with peers) that align with the approach needed to unleash a more empowered, trusting and constructive climate in which to work. Consider Ghandi's motto of *'be the change you wish to see in the world'*.
- Thinking about how to increase the importance of reflection in the way you and others go about things. This may include others' inputs but needs to have time built in to individual leaders' weeks to think about how things have gone and how they are going to approach things and to the systemic impact of actions and behaviours.
- Look at how far you can increase the empowerment of other people within the established processes. There is usually some flexibility and it offers opportunities for you to be bolder and to tap in to the talent of others while demonstrating trust in them.
- Think about how you can influence your peers at management meetings through your own behaviour (eg. thinking stakeholders and purpose rather than function) and by constructive challenge and suggestions.
- Review how you communicate informally by walking the job. Not only how much you do this, but how far are you trying to impact on the culture and 'how we do things around here' rather than simply task-focused activity.
- View **Figure 3** and ask yourself the question 'where do I fit on the lists of good leadership and outstanding leadership approaches and behaviours?'

## Implications for leadership in practice

- **Outstanding leadership is systemic**  
The challenge for leadership is to constantly question the sustainability of its practice. Retaining purpose at the heart of leadership and connecting individuals and teams to the impact that they have on the communities they serve will act as a constant reminder of why the organisation exists. Thinking about the big picture in this way will help to break down tribal barriers that may exist within organisations and challenge individual leaders' perceptions of who they are leading, serving and responsible for. Leaders also need to think about impact at a local level and assess with care what the reactions might be to the actions they are considering.
- **Outstanding leadership puts people first**  
An organisation is simply a group of people of mixed skills, talents, attributes and temperaments working together to achieve a common goal. Without people, all that exists is a husk of a building containing dormant computers and policies. Leadership needs to recognise that people bring organisations to life and that systems and processes serve only to facilitate this. Leaders should use the processes that enable meaningful multi-way communication that offers clarity and breaks down barriers. Leaders should equally rely on the informal moments to get to know people, what excites and drives them, what they hope to achieve and what is important to them. Relationships are built on trust and respect, which cannot be formed unless individuals are valued for their strengths and brought together as a powerful team of equals.
- **Outstanding leadership requires confidence and humility**  
Outstanding leaders are confident – confident of their abilities and the roles they play. Leadership, therefore, needs to challenge the self-limiting beliefs of others to ensure that people grow certain of their strengths and appreciative of the talents of others. During times of change leadership needs to return to the big

picture and be clear about why change is necessary for sustainable success. Change should then be led with passion and resilience. Ultimately, individuals need to be self-less in their leadership. Sustainable success means leading way beyond one's own tenure and to be an outstanding leader, one must balance the importance of role with the responsibility of purpose.

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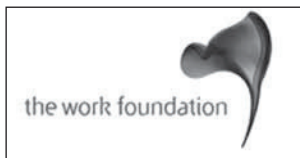


### Ian Lawson

Ian Lawson is Business Development Director for the Leadership programme at The Work Foundation. He has worked at The Work Foundation (Formerly The Industrial Society) for over 26 years and has over this time been deeply embedded in supporting its work on leadership from action-centred, though to liberating leadership to the latest research on outstanding leadership.

He has worked with organisations across all sectors with a particular emphasis on public service organisations and policing. These have included the Home Office, UKBA, Ministry of Justice, National School of Government, Metropolitan Police and many regional police forces. He has worked mainly at SCS/ACPO level through to grades seven and chief inspectors. Work has included running leadership programmes over the last decade for over 3,000 participants, one-to-one and team coaching, team-building workshops and presentations. He has been closely involved in the Outstanding Leadership research project and has also supported work by NPIA and the Flanagan report into policing.

Ian has written four booklets on leadership and produced a video on performance appraisal. He has appeared on breakfast and lunchtime TV business programmes, and been interviewed on various radio stations including the Today programme on BBC radio, regional programmes, 5 live and the World Service. He is on the editorial board for the International Journal of Leadership in Public Services and the Army education and training board at Pirbright, which is looking to embed coaching within its training organisation.



### The Work Foundation

The Work Foundation builds on the legacy of The Industrial Society, out of which they were born in 2002. For more than 80 years, The Industrial Society campaigned to improve the quality of working life, emphasising practical training interventions that organisations could adopt to do this. The Work Foundation continues that tradition as an independent campaigning charity but around a different model. They develop ideas and knowledge about successful workplaces and organisations from their own body of research. They seek to disseminate this information through a focus on dedicated advocacy, strategic advice and practical solutions. [www.theworkfoundation.com](http://www.theworkfoundation.com)