

Navigating the new waters of national leadership

A report by Common Purpose into the expectations, challenges and hurdles of making the leap to a national leadership role

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Foreword

Making the leap from local or regional to national leadership can be daunting. There is no guidebook. Mistakes are often public, with UK-wide or high-profile consequences.

These are the leaders who will influence the direction taken by their organisations and, in the process, shape the society we live in. No route to national leadership is the same, whether it is in the public, private or voluntary sector, and it is up to the individual leader to make it successful.

Feedback from many senior leaders suggests that nearly everyone fears that they aren't up to the task at some point. There are common barriers to this shift; the blind spots and insecurities of moving into a different 'circle' and not knowing the 'right language' or 'customs' needed to get things done.

These barriers are often hidden, unclear and unexpected. No leader who is new to or about to take on a national role, no matter how seasoned, skilled or midas-touched they have been, can afford not to contemplate their new landscape and consider how to equip themselves with the knowledge and insights that will help them make a step change to operate at the most senior level in any context.

To understand what it takes to rise to the challenge, Common Purpose has asked a diverse range of national leaders about their experience of making this leadership leap. They have candidly revealed the challenges they faced in navigating a new and unfamiliar maze of language and customs, and crucially, they flag potential pitfalls and offer advice on making a successful transition to a national leadership role.

Their frank and generous answers are a unique, illuminating - and sometimes amusing - insight into the complexities of attaining a national remit and an invaluable guide to anyone who is about to embark on a national leadership role.

Marie Mohan, Operations Director, Common Purpose and
Director of 20:20, Common Purpose's programme for senior leaders.

Tales from navigating the new waters of national leadership

The central challenge of moving to a national role is that, after successfully rising up the ranks of an organisation, industry or regional power structure, a leader finds that there is a whole new mountain to climb. Not just a mountain – but a full mountain range, with peaks in every direction. Leaders suddenly need a better understanding of the broader context, and a wide angle lens with which to look further ahead.

The route to such a leadership position is not generic. It doesn't take the form of a standard set of conditions that can neatly be understood and planned for. Instead, the unique set of circumstances that propel a leader to a national role as well as the skills and talents distinctive to the leaders themselves, determine the challenges they will face and the choices they can make. During the process, the leader needs to stay true to their personal values – and their sense of self-belief - and in the process, motivate and inspire others.

While the experiences of others in making the leap may not provide a step by step guide; they can provide an important navigational tool. We asked the following questions:

What was the most difficult aspect of making the transition from local to national leader?

'Letting go' is the big problem. You have to 'let go' of the desire to be involved in everything and try to 'fix' things yourself as you might locally. You have to delegate to and trust others. I would say that, from a Christian perspective, letting go is not just an essential ingredient of good leadership but a vital spiritual discipline.

Dr John Inge, Bishop of Worcester

What was the most difficult aspect(s) of making the transition from local to national leadership? Trying to understand national levers to support local delivery and linking local needs to national approaches. The shift from day to day 'team' you see everyday to wide 'team' spread across wide geography. Customising role and impact to reflect different needs within national organisations and geographical locations.

**Stephanie Palmerone,
Director of Partnerships,
Grove Investments**

My biggest challenge working nationally has been balancing the travel required with the needs of family and children. Also, from a cultural perspective, staying overnight away from home is not always approved of in Asian families. However my experiences are mostly positive. The national travel is balanced by the ability to work from home when I need to. I have had to improve my sense of direction since starting this post. I once drove to Bristol using a SATNAV and got hopelessly lost in the one way system. Now I travel mostly by train.

**Shahana Ramsden, Deputy Director,
Delivering Race Equality Programme,
Care Service Improvement Partnership**

Local to national challenges in a UK city region like Manchester and the North West, where I worked as Head of Press and PR for Manchester Airport (1996-2002), it was relatively straightforward to map regional stakeholders. There are clear opportunities to make connections with key players and we largely shared a common policy and regeneration agenda for the greater benefit of the city and region. This emphasis on common economic grounds continued when I made the switch to one of the region's largest employers in the science sector, AstraZeneca.

A year later, I was promoted to lead a national team, which covered nine sites and 12,000 employees (with the exception of the Sales and Marketing arm) and I found there were significant differences in both navigating the national agenda and gaining the internal buy-in for national approaches. The number of stakeholders and competing agendas, especially for funding, means you really have to focus and agree on the areas which will make the most difference to your business, easier said than done!

**Sally Sykes,
Director of Communications, DePuy**

Having the confidence (aka arrogance!) to suppose that I could motivate large numbers of people to achieve the objectives we had set ourselves, part of which was understanding that I would only succeed in doing so if I learned to work with and through other people rather than trying to do everything myself.

Tim Melville Ross, Chairman, DTZ

Leadership, as ever, is all about people. Having grown a successful business from a back bedroom, my leadership challenge was how to maintain the strong beliefs and values in the organisation as it grew rapidly in different continents. The key for me was having the confidence to remain true to myself.

**Phil Murray, Chief Executive Officer,
Petrotechnics**

The key challenge is to help more people to develop their leadership skills and to give them the courage and persuasiveness to address our big national challenges.

**Sir Michael Lyons, Professor of Public
Policy, University of Birmingham**

The foreign language and customs of national leadership

Every workplace, organisation and industry has its own set of language, customs and stories. There can be complex sets of labels and acronyms for groups and procedures that complicate rather than simplify communication, and more confusingly, the unwritten and invisible expectations of how things 'should be done'. Not only do they provide a barrier for those new to them, they can lead to confusion when a term – or action – means one thing at a regional level and sends an entirely different signal at a national level.

The consequences of making a mistake can have a detrimental effect on the confidence and credibility of someone who has recently become a national leader. Misreading or misinterpreting situations can result in amusing misunderstandings or have serious consequences.

No dictionary exists that will enable a leader to understand the complete lexicon and customs of national leadership, so the following experiences may be a useful guide:

What are the language and customs that people have to understand when they become national leaders?

The most important language/custom that you have to understand in any organisation is that the higher you go in it the less likely people within it are to speak the truth to you and the more likely they are to tell you what they think you want to hear. One of the biggest potential pitfalls is not being aware of this fact.

Dr John Inge, Bishop of Worcester

At national level, which implies dealing with different cultures and degrees of understanding of a common language, you have to be very clear and unambiguous in the language used, and respectful of others' customs.

A story: Chairing a small Dutch bank with a mixed board of Dutch, Brits and South Africans, I asked the CEO at a board meeting how we should respond to the then current difficult economic conditions. He replied that he thought we should play with a straight bat and avoid flashing at any loose balls outside the off stump. The Brits and South Africans present understood perfectly, but the Dutch, all of whom spoke perfect English, were baffled to say the least.

Tim Melville Ross, Chairman, DTZ

On language and customs, it's vital to speak and understand 'human'. It's no good being remote and self-important, the ability to listen and even more important, learn, is key. That means team-building is like making a cocktail, you need to acknowledge that it takes all sorts, not everyone can be thrusting 'doers', you need 'thinkers' and the odd 'dependable'.

Jon Williams, World News Editor, BBC

Each organisation or institution has its own language. The issue is more about learning the organisation's terms. The navy is a classic example, everyone is known by acronyms and stars so CINC is a four star as is 1st. Then everything you do has a bizarre name so 'com opps op herrik 9' has raised concerns about....etc.

The only new national language is about other national quangos you may have been removed from. So you may have been removed from Ofqual when you were working in your LA, but when you move to DCSF you need to know who they are! You may also be exposed to the language of central government for the first time, meeting the box deadline, bill drafters etc. Internally you may be up against corporate governance, audit, group structures, subsidiary relationships, mergers, shareholder investments, maximising return on capital for the first time.

Zenna Atkins, Chair, The Places for People Group

You have to think differently and remember all the time that not everyone shares your reference points like local geography, customs, sport preferences, local celebrities and so on. There are significant differences in the UK, we may seem to be quite homogenous as a nation, but the regional variations can be eye-opening. Also, when you are operating nationally you are usually working outside your organisation and sector. You have to check yourself when you use acronyms, for example, in the pharmaceutical industry, a 'CD' is a 'candidate drug' ie a promising new medicine - it's a term the whole industry uses but, of course, to the outside world a CD is a compact disk!

Sally Sykes, Director of Communications, DePuy

I drink Glenmorangie in Scotland, Bushmills in Ireland and I don't drink in Wales. Duck is a term of endearment in Nottinghamshire, a bathtoy in Sheffield and a much loved water bird in Cumbria. Don't assume what works in Chester has any links to what work in Chelsea. Beware talking football in Hull, Wigan or Warrington, understand league or be damned. 'That's really interesting' means 'that's really interesting' or 'please go away now'.

On a more serious note the history of employment in an area has a key impact on values and attitudes of current workforce and the local political make-up is key to anything happening, know the local colour of the political map and whether it is long term or subject to four year floating voter whim. Respect the history of a geographical area and don't assume that a national priority is a local one.

Stephanie Palmerone, Director of Partnerships, Grove Investments

Identify the tourists. Who is more concerned about being at the table than what they actually contribute? Who is there because they are actually competent and who is there because they are office politicians?

James Ramsbotham, Chief Executive, North East Chamber of Commerce

Stumbling blocks on the road to national leadership

The consequences of making a mistake at a national leadership level can have serious repercussions for the career of the leader, their organisation, industry or even the country. This is likely to be on the mind of any leader making the transition to national leadership and one of the factors that is guiding their decisions and actions.

Leaders don't get to national roles by being timid, risk averse or making bad decisions. They are already experienced in balancing courage and caution, and pace and timing, in order to fulfil their vision. At the national level, the stakes are higher but the leadership learning process continues: Looking outwards, at others, means that common pitfalls can be spotted and prepared for, and it is possible to minimise the risks of being derailed on a leadership journey.

To help identify common difficulties on the route to national leadership, we asked the following:

What are the potential pitfalls when making the leap to national leadership?

In terms of the pitfalls, seems to me the real danger is thinking you've made it simply by getting there, that because you've got to a leadership role, you must have all the answers. Actually, the truth is quite the reverse. That's the time to be the human sponge, mop up the insights and intelligence. Sure, have the vision, but use the experiences of others to map the route rather than expecting everyone to find their own way. And the platform becomes a virtuous circle, networks open up, you're exposed to fresh ideas from other sectors. Each reinforces the last, that's the real privilege of the national leadership role.

Jon Williams, World News Editor, BBC

On pitfalls, the danger of assuming that your leadership experience so far is a full preparation for your new role, or indeed that your existing networks are adequate. Also, in many national roles, there is likely to be a much greater and intrusive media dimension than you are used to.

Tim Melville Ross, Chairman, DTZ

The more senior the level at which you operate, the more complex the personal agendas and the more they get in the way. If you do not try to unravel them you will not be able to combat them and you will not achieve your objectives. You will be obstructed for apparently illogical reasons.

James Ramsbotham, Chief Executive, North East Chamber of Commerce

Making assumptions that people will automatically 'get' the bigger picture. So many people concentrate on their immediate priorities and work in silos. Others want to plough their own furrow because it's more creative and distinctive. Work is so demanding nowadays that creating the space to see outside your piece of the organisation is often difficult. People don't have the thinking space and as a national leader, you have to create a simple view of how things all join up and why working to an aligned agenda is better for the business.

Sally Sykes, Director of Communications, DePuy

Getting removed from anything interesting, all theory no action, all about management and process not about production and delivery, seeing huge salaries and wanting them, thinking that local is less, believing the hype, losing touch with reality, never seeing your kids, boring yourself, thinking meetings are work, seeing profit margins in the weekly shopping. Being more scared of the corporate legal team than your wife. Putting compliance and governance before strategy and customers and staff.

Zenna Atkins, Chair, The Places for People Group

One for me is the fact that I try to still spend five days a month with the people we support and the staff who work with them on a daily basis. Some people don't understand my role and are really open and share the good stuff and the not so good stuff, as they start to understand it they become embarrassed or close up. Retaining a sense of the reality of what it's like on the ground is hard, hence my five days a month rule that I have had for a long time.

Another one is not having the detail knowledge of a region or a service in a region when you are working with people who do. Retaining capacity to implement change can only be done through building talented teams from different systems to make happen and supporting.

Trying to second guess what the dress code will be in so many different environments without falling into grey suit hell!

Stephanie Palmerone, Director of Partnerships, Grove Investments

Advice from veterans of the national leadership leap

The most powerful learning is often through experience – your own or another’s. As a leader steers their own course to national leadership, the advice of those who have already plotted a route can be indispensable.

It is people that make things happen. While it might take time and seem to slow you down, checking who is with you, and crucially, who is not, at any point on the journey can be a critical investment in getting to the outcome that produces lasting, not superficial, change. Interestingly, it may not be exactly the outcome envisaged, as different people bring new perspectives and experiences that can hone a solution.

To provide those making the transition to national leadership with practical advice they can use, we asked the following:

What advice would you give to someone who is making the leap from local to national?

Be very clear about what it is your organisation, department, is trying to achieve. Surround yourself with the best people you can find to help you achieve that, and then communicate ceaselessly with everybody, both internally and externally, who might be able to influence the outcome.

Tim Melville Ross, Chairman, DTZ

Work hard to establish points of agreement and common ground amongst stakeholders - what do you all agree on? Be prepared for the length of time public policy decisions and changes can take, and be patient with the processes. Don't give up, keep a sense of perspective and a sense of humour.

**Sally Sykes,
Director of Communications, DePuy**

My advice to someone making the leap is to be true to yourself and keep it authentic and human.

**Phil Murray, Chief Executive Officer,
Petrotechnics**

The advice I would give to people making the leap from local to national is to do some work on their inner life. Only those who are relatively 'sorted' in themselves will make good leaders and avoid causing pain to themselves and others.

Dr John Inge, Bishop of Worcester

Maintain a small group of people as touchstones and support. Choose who you work for and with, not a job description. Remember its people that make things happen but the connections take longer and might need more time to develop a sense of trust.

Keep ways of measuring the depth as well as the breadth. Keep learning and celebrate the fact that there are more people and more cultures to learn from.

Stay focused on what you are there to do. Recognise influence needs to be through and with more people than direct contact.

**Stephanie Palmerone, Director of
Partnerships, Grove Investments**

Any change is much the same, it is about getting to know new stuff and new people and new ways of doing things.

**Zenna Atkins, Chair, The Places for People
Group**

Be as clear as possible about what you are trying to do and what you want others to do, it helps if you can develop a compelling story to answer the question, Why?

Develop your listening skills. You are unlikely to be as wise as the sum of all those around you. Be wary about the suggestion that some people are more important than others. Whether they be electors, customers or audiences, you put yourself in peril if you underestimate your public. Reflection is the most important 'tool' in the leadership kit!

**Sir Michael Lyons, Professor of Public
Policy, University of Birmingham**

As with any other leadership role, you need to have the courage and/or naivety to swim against the tide. The North East of England finally delivered its long overdue economic resurgence from about 2005. We waited until mid 2006 to start to shout about it. Others finally caught on towards the end of 2006. By 2008 everyone wanted a piece of the action but we had established ourselves in the eyes of national third parties as being the champion of the North East economy. So, if you feel something is worth promoting – go for it.

**James Ramsbotham, Chief Executive,
North East Chamber of Commerce**

“Too often, these leaders have not understood the world they were moving into and tried to introduce an order that is familiar to them. Or they have taken too long to understand the world they have walked into - and missed the boat as a result. They were simply not allowed the time to acclimatise. Some, however, have fallen for the flattery and seen no need to adapt. That are simply blind to both the differences and the merits of the new world.”

From ‘Beyond Authority- Leadership in a Changing World’ by Julia Middleton, Chief Executive of Common Purpose

Conclusion

The move from local or regional to national leadership is a huge leadership leap. Everything suddenly becomes magnified - the risk and the rewards. As the senior leaders in the report who have made this leap indicate, this can make the transition a stressful and exciting experience, as a leader has a chance to influence and produce change on a national scale.

The experiences of the leaders who have made the shift centre on being true to themselves and engaging effectively with others. Dealing with a complex new web of stakeholders and bigger and dispersed teams means that a leader needs to challenge their own assumptions, seek out different perspectives and look for new ideas from unexpected people and places. It seems the best compass to navigate by is also your integrity – that which made you an authentic leader initially.

A shrewd observation was made that the more senior you are the less likely people will tell you the truth, a vital caveat for any national leader. Scanning the landscape and really listening to what is happening around you helps map out the operating context. A raft of confusing acronyms seem unavoidable in most roles, but ultimately are easy to learn. Being brave enough to be straightforward at the right moment is less likely to lead to confusion than a series of nuanced expressions.

Believing that you are fully prepared for national leadership simply because you are now a national leader was identified as one of the biggest stumbling blocks. The leaders who contributed to the report balanced humility with self belief in their leadership capabilities – and how these continue to grow over time. Being open to new ideas, new ways of doing things and maintaining contact with people at all levels of your organisation ensure a leader is ‘outward-facing’ and open to new opportunities.

Leaders operating at a national level need to be sensitized to other people’s competing agendas and priorities. Tempting others to look over their parapets, to consider the world through each others’ eyes and to try to speak the same language is one of the biggest challenges. Knowing how to break through boundaries and work across silos will stand anyone taking on a national role in very good stead.

Finally, their experiences also suggest that this is as much a leadership revolution as a transition. Knowledge, experience and confidence in their leadership abilities provide the foundations while being open to learning, believing in looking for new ideas and never giving up are keys to forging a new role at a national level.

20:20 programme



In order to help leaders manage this leap successfully, leadership development organisation Common Purpose runs a programme called 20:20.

Common Purpose 20:20 is a leadership programme for senior decision-makers - across all sectors and around the UK - who have, or are about to take on, a national remit. This unique programme has been designed to challenge the leaders who will influence the direction taken by their organisations and, in the process, shape the society we live in.



20:20 brings the future into focus, offering a unique insight into the forces that will shape the political, social and economic landscape of the UK in the next 10 to 15 years. It is an intensive five-day programme that brings together a diverse group of senior decision makers and confronts them with a wide-angle view of the way the UK works, where it sits in an international context and what its long-term future holds.

Through dialogue with top-level businesspeople, politicians, civil servants and economists, the participant group assesses the economic, political, technological and social trends that will shape the UK in years to come, and their leadership role within this context.



Participants have the opportunity to:

- evaluate their strategies in the European and global context
- develop their understanding of the workings of government, equipping them to work with and influence the decision-making process more effectively
- expand their horizons and develop their strategic thinking by honing their understanding of international trends
- generate new ideas that will take their organisations and communities forward
- learn about the implications of managing diversity in the light of demographic changes and increasing globalisation
- stand back from the day-to-day and consider the long-term, reducing the risk of getting derailed by the unexpected.

About Common Purpose



Since 1989, Common Purpose has been helping people in leadership and decision-making positions to be more effective: in their own organisations, in the community and in society as a whole.

Common Purpose now runs programmes in 70 locations across Germany, France, Ghana, Hungary, India, Ireland, South Africa, Sweden, The Netherlands and the UK, with further programmes developing in Israel and Turkey.

We run a variety of programmes for leaders of all ages, backgrounds and sectors, in order to provide them with the inspiration, the knowledge and the connections they need to produce real change.

Over 120,000 leaders are actively involved in our programmes. In the UK, more than 70 per cent of FTSE 100 companies, as well as many smaller organisations, have used Common Purpose to develop their leaders. They, and their organisations, consistently report better strategic thinking, better decision-making, dramatically enhanced leadership competencies and a greater ability to apply them in new situations as a result of their experience with Common Purpose.



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“All leaders need to be brave if anyone is going to follow them, either in or beyond their authority.”

From 'Beyond Authority- Leadership in a Changing World' by Julia Middleton, Chief Executive of Common Purpose