



The Change Management Challenges Facing the Public Sector

In this brief overview John Harvey, Managing Director of IRIS Consulting, outlines issues facing leaders in today's public service environment

Both central and local government bodies have encountered “capacity” shortcomings in their quest to deliver services. The nature of the shortcomings that have been identified is more to do with lack of particular skills (especially leadership) than any shortage in overall resources or budgets.

Central government has been boosting the funding available to the major public sector service deliverers but concerns about their delivering a better service to the end users remain. What can be done about this disconnect between the Government making extra resources available but public services still showing few visible improvements on the ground?

Recent research carried out by IRIS Consulting indicates that the capacity for organisations to improve is determined primarily by having the right people with the right knowledge, skills and behaviours in place – not their systems or management organisation.

Much work has been done over the years in developing HR systems such as competency frameworks. But by themselves these are insufficient. Having put in place these types of policies and systems the key issue remains:

“How can the vision be turned into actual changes in behaviour?”

What is needed is the clarity and commitment to apply it effectively. For example development centres can be used to identify strengths and areas for improvement in personnel at all levels in the organisation. Many employers in the private sector are now selecting and recruiting with the aim of getting staff with the right attitudes and mind-sets on the basis that it is fairly easy subsequently to train people in the technical know-how for their job.

In the words of one local authority chief executive we interviewed as part of our recent research into management styles:

“We’ve outsourced, we’ve changed our IT systems, and none of it worked. It’s people that are the critical factor. Great people will compensate for almost anything - including bad systems.”