

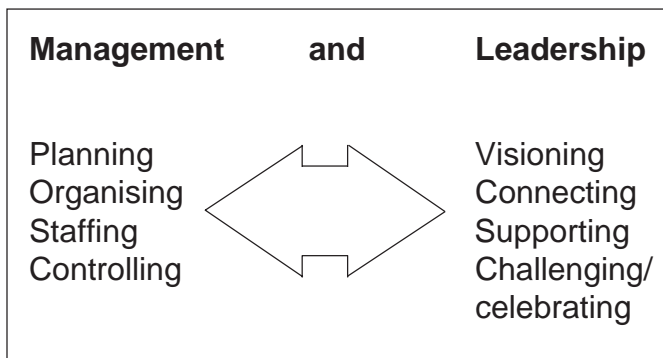
Management styles and characteristics of local authority housing benefit managers

By Lisa Grainger, Dr Emma Bird and John Harvey

Key findings

Effective managers of local authority housing benefit departments need to have a combination of skills and characteristics. While there is no single model of what makes a good manager the researchers found that there is a good measure of agreement amongst local authority HB staff and senior management about the characteristics of a good HB manager.

These characteristics were mapped by the researchers using a conceptual leadership and management framework. This framework is summarised in the diagram below:



This framework acknowledges that the skills and traits normally associated with “management” or “leadership” can co-exist. Instead of being mutually exclusive they are a continuum with individual managers displaying apparently paradoxical traits in order to achieve high levels of performance from their teams and organisation.

Towards the “management” end of the continuum the research found that amongst the better performing housing benefit departments the

managers in those local authorities possessed the following characteristics to a high order.

Planning and visioning

- Forward planning: this trait enable their staff and organisations to cope with frequent change.
- Being “on top of the detail” and meticulous: this trait provides comfort for both senior managers (who want to be assured the service is in safe hands) and for front-line staff (who want to know that their manager understands the implications of change and is able to provide advice and support).
- Able to organise the job set effectively rather than being obsessed by formal structures.

Organising and connecting

- Effective in securing adequate resources for doing the day-to-day work – evidenced in business planning, IT and staff training. Also good at getting additional resources to support and deliver change management activities.

Staffing and supporting

- Good at promoting team working and in communicating: these traits are often manifested in the personal style of the managers being “approachable” and “listening”.

- Securing the right level of staff resources, protecting and developing those resources: all the good performing departments had used the Investors in People (IiP) framework to good effect; training for front-line staff is regarded as a priority by these HB managers.

Controlling and challenging/celebrating

- All are comfortable, even relish, working in a performance and target driven environment: they tend to view performance indicators as relevant and meaningful to the service they are expected to deliver.
- The researchers found differing attitudes to methods of monitoring performance: some HB managers favoured close monitoring of individuals; others favoured team based monitoring.

Towards the “leadership” end of the continuum the research identified the following characteristics amongst the high performing HB managers:

- While not visionary they were able to see the “big picture” with their feet firmly on the ground and focused on operational realities.
- They are champions of constructive change and enthusiastic about performance improvement.
- They foster good relations with senior management - often as a means of ensuring their service gets the resources it needs.
- They support their teams energetically – especially through training and planning ahead to prepare for change.
- They are good at challenging existing ways of doing things; they celebrate performance improvement.

One of the apparently paradoxical findings from the research was that while many HB managers were described in terms such as “does not suffer fools gladly” and “sets high standards”, it was also commented that they often used humour to good effect to bring out the best in their teams and to defuse difficult situations.

The research found that there is no correlation with any particular type of IT system, software or supplier. All the case studies had, or will soon have, experience of major IT systems changes. Ensuring that forward planning processes take account of the potential impact of changes to systems and that there are dedicated IT support resources are critical factors.

Summary of research

General conclusions

Overall the research found the avowed and prevailing culture of these high performing HB authorities is one where:

- change is well accepted and planned for.
- teams are eager to continuously improve.
- “customer first” principles operate.

It also appears that this is supported by a sub-culture of traditional public sector values where employees stay with the business and are focused on the specific purposes of the service.

The research does not point to a single model of management style that guarantees success. Rather it indicates that there are some combinations of distinct management and leadership traits that are associated with high performing HB services.

The research

This research study was carried out by IRIS Consulting on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) during the period September 2003 – February 2004.

The purpose of the research was to seek to identify whether there are any consistently recurring characteristics of the way housing benefit caseloads are managed by the top performing local authorities which could then provide pointers and “good practice” lessons for dissemination amongst other local authority HB service providers. These pointers might relate to the personal characteristics and style of the HB

managers as well as to management structures and support systems.

A key focus for the research was to identify those characteristics of good managers which help explain good performance in terms of HB administration. Hence the research was carried out only with high performing (or recently fast improving) authorities on the hypothesis that what is being done in those authorities is associated in some way with management practices and behaviours that result in good performance.

Methodology

The research involved:

- A review of existing research and data sources.
- Development of a conceptual management/ leadership framework to enable the researchers to map the characteristics in a consistent and systematic form.
- In-depth case studies in seven local authority areas.

The case studies were selected using the following criteria:

- Local authorities which had HB performance in the top quartile (according to the published data on HB Performance Indicators) or had made significant progress in improving performance (which are referred to as 'turnaround' case studies in the report).
- A range of different local authority types and scale of HB operations (such as metropolitan councils, district councils and London Boroughs).
- A variety of geographical and social contexts (such as urban, rural, northern, midlands, southeast).

The research team from IRIS Consulting Ltd comprised:

- John Harvey (project director).
- Lisa Grainger (lead consultant: case study fieldwork).
- Dr Emma Bird (lead consultant management/ leadership framework).

The full report of these research findings is published for the Department for Work and Pensions by Corporate Document Services (ISBN 1 84123 7264 1. Research Report 218. September 2004).

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