

Political Leadership In Context And In Action: A Briefing Note

The context for you as a local leader couldn't be more challenging – severe budget cuts looming, numerous policy demands, rising public service expectations and many local problems and pressures. It is important for leaders to have a strong and continuing sense of their context in which they work if they are not to be pushed around by every emerging pressure.

Responding to our context has a critical individual and psychological dimension which is why we raise it on this first module on personal leadership. Ronald Heifetz, whose work we will return to, suggests there are three dimensions of leading in any context:

1. the capacity to **'get on the balcony'** to see what is the context for you
2. the courage to look for priorities and take action in **'the practice field'** – your local patch
3. the sense to **'look after yourself'**

This very brief note will, we hope, assist in your thinking more about them in preparation for the module.

1. *Getting on the balcony*: How aware are you of your context?

This phrase captures the idea that all leaders need to know their context by standing above it and seeing the:

- **whole picture**
- **challenges and forces at work**
- **relationships of local communities and partners to the authority**
- **patterns of influence and possibilities for action**

This is not to know everything – that is clearly impossible. Rather it is standing above your situation, collecting critical information about three areas and **asking what forces for change are at play: external to your area, local to your area and those internal to the council.**

Looking from the balcony the **context of external forces** is hugely varied. The chart annexed shows many of the major global and national pressures, how they impact on local government and what specific local leadership challenges you face. To know about them all is clearly unreasonable but...

a) Do you have a sense of which external forces have a local impact and for which you have a leadership role and responsibility?

The **context of local forces** may be all too familiar. It is the second aspect of the view from the balcony. Many problems and opportunities repeatedly present themselves to you (you keep meeting the 'usual suspects') but many need seeking out.

The idea of Total Place has encouraged us all to see the local context as requiring a thorough understanding of community needs and priorities, the full range of public service activity and the aggregate public resources going into each 'place'. It **crucially challenges** us to find new ways of bringing them all together. All of which need leadership energy and focus.

b) Do you have an updated sense of what is happening locally as it relates to your leadership roles and are you seeking to bring it together?

The **context of forces within the council** may be well known to you and the reason for 'getting on the balcony' is to get a perspective on what is most important – seeing the wood not just the trees. Some of the issues you will know in 'too much detail, others not at all. What are the major forces for change in service delivery (poor quality, too great a cost, budget overruns), organisational working (too much silo behaviour, inability to change, lack of creativity) and ability to communicate (internally to staff and members and externally to the public, media and partners).

c) Do you have a strong enough grasp of what is happening in the council, particularly as it connects to your role?

2. Taking action in the practice field: How psychologically ready are you to take action?

Seeing the context is one thing, deciding what action to take is another. This requires above all that you to prioritise what and where you will take action. But prioritising and taking action include handling a difficult mix of personal psychological responses. These typically are the psychology of:

- **facing hard choices** (particularly with budget cuts) affecting things you stand for
- **making enough sense of major issues and taking risks** – knowing you don't know it all, nor ever will
- **handling complexity and uncertainty** – dealing with situations where there are no clear answers, unclear causes, major uncertainties and yet experimenting and moving forward
- **tackling many things at once** – like buses critical issues rarely appear one at a time
- **being clear about ones leadership narrative on an issue without being over simplistic**
- **having the courage to take action**

Prioritising and action have a complex psychology to which each of us as leaders have a unique response. The next few years will make big demands across all these characteristics of leadership action.

How well do you know where you are strong in these characteristics and where you need to develop in establishing priorities, taking action and sticking with it?

3. Looking after yourself: How much care do you take of yourself

We meet many leaders who are at risk of 'drowning' or 'burning out'. Leaders are no good if they are on this edge, yet the current context you face seems to give you little option but to take on too much. There is a clear need to manage ourselves in pressured leadership roles which show every sign of becoming more demanding.

There are many aspects to looking after yourself which we will touch on in the first module. Some key features of looking after yourself are recognising the need to:

- **preserve a sense of purpose**
keep asking and preserving your sense of what your leadership is for
- **externalise the conflict - roles are not people**
separate the conflicts of issues from conflicts of people
- **give work away**
maybe you can do it better than anyone else but they need to develop and you need to reclaim your time
- **use partners**
lone warriors are an outdated model of leadership
- **listen to yourself**
what is my head, heart and body saying?
- **find a sanctuary**
get space and time away

What practical steps do you take in looking after yourself?

Overall

Context and leadership is a wide net. We trust these three themes – getting on the balcony, taking action in practice, and looking after yourself – will stimulate your thinking about how well you are leading effectively in your context. The module will give you an opportunity to take it further.

Global to Local



Global/National pressures

1. Economic turbulence, limits on borrowing and public spending
2. Recession impacts on business, jobs, housing build and regeneration
3. Increasing demographic pressures, mobility and service expectations
4. Environmental, natural resource and climate pressures
5. Evolving technology impacts on demands, information and social exchange
6. Industrial and business structures
7. Peoples expectations of their community, government and politicians
8. National and international policy changes

Impact on Local Government

1. Borrowing limits and spending cuts
2. Multiple service and revenue impacts
3. Rapidly varying service pressures and personalised delivery expectations
4. Target requirements on e.g. waste, recycling, carbon footprint
5. Utilisation of technology for service access, service monitoring and citizen engagement
6. Fluidity of location and type of activity
7. Focus on 'place': resources going into an area - 'total place' - and engagement with all branches of public service for that 'place'.
8. Changes in governments and evolving policies with consequent impacts on local government

Local Leadership Challenges

1. Reduced budgets met by reprioritising, efficiencies, service cuts
2. Responsive measures to particular needs, revenue drops, public spend possibilities
3. Response to fluctuating and personalisation service agendas
4. Meeting ever increasing and extensive demands
5. Shifting the vehicle for service access, management and scrutiny
6. Effective responses to sustaining and regenerating possibilities
7. 'Place' based partnerships delivering focused seamless, cost saving public services. Public engagement both smarter and fit for the 'place'
8. Responding appropriately to these top down requirements to fit within the overall local agenda