Leadership in turbulent times
Developing a personal strategy to deal with difficult circumstances
Leadership in turbulent times

The challenges and difficulties facing managers and leaders in Wales have never been greater. Faced with the constraints of the global economic crisis, political instability and increasing stakeholder demands and expectations, managers across all sectors need to find fresh approaches to leadership if they are to thrive and perform in the current climate. The future remains uncertain as Governments come under increasing pressure to rescue private businesses with massive bail out plans whilst dealing with the demands of possible global pandemics, international conflict and social inequality. These tensions, pressures and difficulties play out in the management and delivery of public services. The knock-on effect is that managers and leaders across the public sector are being asked to operate in difficult circumstances; under increasing pressure to deliver high quality services to meet an expanding range of complexifying needs, to a broader constituent, within tighter budgets.

This cocktail of challenges that are in many ways unprecedented in terms of their size and complexity require new and unprecedented approaches to leadership that shift perspective and technique. These must take us beyond the judicious and effective control of resources to the imaginative liberation of new capabilities and enterprise that trade conventional power for authority and influence. Adding to the case for developing new approaches to leadership and management is the legitimacy crisis facing many of our leading institutions. Public confidence in Government agencies is at an all time low. In a survey conducted during the summer of 2005, only 50% of those questioned believed what they were told by public service organisations and individuals. In the wake of the crisis caused by revelations about MP’s expenses, the figure has plummeted to 25%. The impact of this upon public service delivery is considerable because of the corrosive effect it has upon the relationship of trust between the service provider and user. It is therefore vital that leaders and managers re-establish their legitimate authority in ways that build confidence and trust with the public in order to deal effectively with the mounting challenges they face. In this regard, the public are not the problem but the solution.
Although the current circumstances we face as managers and leaders are unique in their complexity and ferocity, we have lived through turbulent times before and emerged with insight and clarity. In a crisis what is needed are leaders who operate in a calm manner, who are confident in recognising their strengths and weaknesses, who act intuitively and in the moment and who are able to make sense of the situation for themselves and others and learn from the experience. Part of this leadership is the challenge to accept that turbulence is inevitable, even when things seem calm the seeds of the next storm are being sown - somewhere. Knowing this takes courage, particularly to lead in a manner that instills trust and confidence in others. This often requires the ability to be seen as solid, stalwart and unchanging in the face of pressure and distraction. Leaders can become consumed with the idea that they must at all times appear consistent and linear in their approach almost to the point of being predictable in the way they appear to others. Yet often leadership is about managing the tensions between being agile and flexible enough to change one’s mind but congruent in values and beliefs.

To be an effective manager and leader and to thrive in turbulent times, individuals must acquire the following:

- An understanding of turbulence and its effect upon organisations and individuals
- An ability to operate effectively, making sound decisions and exercising intuitive judgement in moments of crisis
- To manage the tensions and conflicts that often accompany contradiction and complexity
- To lead in a deft and agile way whilst instilling confidence in others
Understanding turbulence

What is turbulence?
Turbulence is a term we use when describing natural phenomena in a state of flow or violent momentum - for example, hurricanes, volcanoes, floods and avalanches. It is used to convey a picture of opposing energies or forces that when coming together are so cataclysmic they often leave devastation in their wake. However turbulence is not something that exists in its own right, it’s a product or outcome when external forces are often uncontrollable, unpredictable and unsettle the normal flow of things. In nature there are two principal sources of this disruptive energy, changes in temperature and wind direction. Both arise from the continual actions of the sun and the spinning planet, the very forces that sustain life on earth. Turbulence is therefore a natural condition.

It is possible however to plan for turbulence and to manage the effects of it. For example, when a ship is moving through the ocean, it manages the effect of turbulence caused by pushing water across its bow in a smooth calm flow. As the speed of the ship increases a transition is made into turbulent flow and a bow-wave is produced which consists of many eddies and swirls that impact all in their path. Eventually the energy that produces the bow-waves subsides and the sea calms again. An expert navigator understands this and plans to create turbulence as a conscious part of deciding where and how to steer the ship, managing the effect of turbulence created. The lesson from nature is that turbulence is created by all events; there is nothing we can do to stop turbulence. The key is to recognise when we are in the midst of turbulent times and learn how to effectively navigate a course through it whilst planning for the future.

There is more than one sort of turbulence
Turbulence occurs as part of a cycle and we need to understand how and why in order to manage it effectively. This means recognising and understanding the nature and meaning of turbulence when it occurs. Sometimes problems have a familiarity about them. They occur following a pattern of cause and effect that we recognise because of our knowledge and experience. But problems are not always predictable and easily managed through past experience. We sometimes cannot apply old technologies to solving new and enduring problems. This important recognition is described by Rittell and Webber as the difference between Tame problems which often represent the familiar and Wicked problems which are unfamiliar and enduring.
Tame problems
A Tame problem can be complicated but it is likely to have happened before and can be viewed more like a puzzle. The skill here is to find all the pieces and put them together in the right way. To apply a prescribed logic that delivers a remedial outcome. In this regard, Tame problems are often described as having management solutions because the response is a logical application.

Wicked problems
In contrast, a Wicked problem is not merely complicated, it is driven by factors we often cannot see or control. Turbulence is often a consequence of unresolved Wicked issues. It is a by-product of unmanaged forces that acts against the normal flow of things. Inevitably, because we can often see the nature of the turbulence and feel its effect, we focus our attention upon trying to address the turbulence itself rather than the root course of the problem. Solving Wicked issues that are both complex and intractable requires a different approach and understanding. Theorists such as Senge and Sharmer suggest a model that requires providing sufficient time to allow the solution to emerge from the problem. In this instance, the role of the leader is to be observant enough to become aware when the solution is starting to emerge and, importantly, to hold the faith and confidence of those around her or him who will want the problem solved as quickly as possible – often at the expense of a sustainable and long term solution. Having the confidence and authority to create and manage the space in which a solution can appear is essential for the management and resolution of Wicked issues. Linksy and Heifitz offer a further perspective on the resolution of problems that resonates with the model. They suggest that successful problem solving requires building a sufficient perspective to generate an adaptive solution. This is achieved by standing back and trying to understand the problem in its entirety. Often called ‘getting on the balcony’, and off the ‘dance floor’ this provides the opportunity to gain insight and develop a deep understanding which is not always possible when we are located too close to the problem.
Building on these theories and ideas, it is vital that leaders can calm things sufficiently during a crisis and avoid knee jerk reactions, whilst simultaneously making tough and sometimes unpleasant decisions in a timely way. In these circumstances, it is crucial that decisions are taken with a clear view of the bigger picture and the likely long-term impact. Navigating a course through turbulence relies on a sense of responsibility, built on self-assurance, inner calm and focus on the problem at hand. Clear, unambiguous communication is needed so that people feel confident about what is required of them.

When dealing with Tame problems, key crisis-busting public service questions are:

- Who are we here to serve and what is our purpose?
- Who knows what to do in delivering that service?
- What has happened before and how did we overcome it?
- Who is there and who can we talk to about this?
- What are the results we expect to see from the actions?

With the answers to these questions comes a meaningful course of direction, involving and engaging the people who are best placed and skilled, who know how to access existing structures and systems that will help. This has been called interpersonal agency and it means to be able to get positive results through interactions with others.

The element of the workforce most likely to know what service users want and how to provide their desired delivery structures are those who have every day contact with them – the front line. Engaging the front line is a sure way of getting quickly to the heart of the problem in a service industry. The trick is to connect with people, be curious, find out who knows what, what they have done with it and how they have done it.

A wicked problem is one that requires a solution beyond the range of traditional remedies.
Case study

Denbighshire County Council and Conwy Borough Council Adult Mental Health and Social Care Partnership

This project received an Excellence Wales Award in 2007/08. The aim was to create an engagement structure that enabled all stakeholders – service users, their families and carers, staff and voluntary sector partners to fully participate in the planning and decision making of services. The purpose of this was to build a better sustainable service by reducing difficult overheads, ensuring interventions were successful and avoiding duplication in service delivery.

A key underlying factor in the success of the project is the staff forum that keeps communications real, alive, face to face and deals with issues as they arise preventing them turning into crises. For example, care staff experienced anxiety about their value as professionals causing many essential staff to seek jobs elsewhere. The staff forum provided them with a platform to air their grievances and concerns. Whilst this may not have completely allayed their fears, it did demonstrate that their views were valuable and their concerns would not be overlooked and devalued. The project focused upon the creation of problem solving space using the dialogue between key parties as the vehicle for generating and transmitting new ideas and sharing new perspectives.

Addressing Wicked problems

A Wicked problem is one that requires a solution beyond the range of traditional remedies. The answer cannot be gleaned using conventional means of discovery and as a result there is no prescribed plan for delivering an early resolution. Senge and Sharmer stress that this is a critical time for many managers and leaders who are often seduced into trying to solve the problem using conventional means as quickly as possible. When the pressure is on it is often difficult to take time to problem solve. Often we cut corners and try to circumvent the process. This in turn leads to incomplete and sometimes inaccurate data being used to form critical judgements. It is therefore essential when dealing with a Wicked problem to ask even more questions than one would normally do to broaden understanding, reframe the issue in as many ways as possible and generate creativity and innovation.

For Wicked problems, key crisis busting questions include:

• What is unique about this situation, how do we think it has come about?
• Who is involved in this situation and where and what part do they play?
• What feelings or obstructing beliefs are in the way and how do I let them go?
• What is the last thing I’d be advised to do about this in normal circumstances?
• What is really happening right here, right now?
• What are we all doing, how does it help?
• What do others believe at this very moment, right here, right now?
• What can we/I experiment with?

The emphasis here is on the leader, his or her personal strengths, abilities and values and how he or she applies them. This has been called having personal agency and it can be extremely important in making things happen and addressing the difficulties of turbulence. Leaders who are innately curious, outward looking and listen are more able to find ways to ask questions, often resulting in progress that seems nothing short of miraculous. Using personal inquiry can generate deep insight and understanding. It becomes part of the transformational process itself by encouraging self-discovery, liberating thought and aiding reflection. This process has been described by theorists such as Cooperrider as appreciative inquiry because it focuses upon discovering the positive core within individuals and organisations. The key purpose of appreciative inquiry is not to discover the deficit or fault that has lead to the problem itself but to focus upon the core skills and strengths that will help to resolve it.

C. Otto Sharmer in his latest publication, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges*, provides a powerful and persuasive argument for letting go of the preconceptions, habituated ways of thinking and perceiving, and traditional approaches to problem resolution that confine and constrict us in order to let other things come in their place. For leaders and managers who are facing new and unprecedented challenges in their work, having the courage to let go or discharge some of the behaviours and practices that may have led to the problem in the first place is essential. However this can sometimes create the sense of being more vulnerable and exposed to failure at a time when faced with enormous challenges, when our instinct might be to consolidate and strengthen our position. In these circumstances, an example of letting go might be to resist the temptation to rigidify ourselves, to increase our powerbase and become fixed in our views and ideas in order to encourage new perspectives and insights that might accompany a more flexible and agile approach.

**Leading and managing in this way involves:**

• Accepting ambiguity and the fact that things are never really black and white
• Believing in the primacy of relationships over structures or skill sets
• Using personal and appreciative inquiry as a tool for transformation
• Trusting collective intelligence rather than individual knowledge
• Forgetting ego in favour of surrendering to the reality of the moment
• Being prepared to question and let go of those things that may be self-limiting and a constraint upon our potential

The individual who can do this is likely to have invested considerable time in his or her personal development and self-discipline.
Another way that this characteristic is observed is the ability of great leaders to enter a state of "flow". Which in effect, means instinctively doing the right thing when crisis is raging all around them. There is much to suggest that great leaders can operate with deft accuracy when in a state of flow, whether that means winning battles, clinching deals or achieving outcomes for others. Through regular reflection, they are able to more easily access the accumulative wisdom and insight developed over many years and apply it imaginatively and in the moment. The concept of ‘flow’ suggests that there is poetry to the motion of leadership, a rhythm and a pattern that draws upon the energy of the situation and has an integrity that makes sense to everyone around.
Learning from complexity and chaos

Turbulence can add to the complexity of a situation by obscuring the facts and accentuating the fiction. Developing clarity in these circumstances is extremely important in order to avoid misdiagnosing the situation and applying the wrong kind of leadership. Snowden offers the Cynefin Framework as a device to help leaders and managers define the situation in which they find themselves by understanding the nature of the relationship between cause and effect. He offers five different contexts to help explain the circumstances leaders and managers are faced with in their work every day. They are simple, complicated, complex, chaotic and disordered. Snowden’s simple context has been rehearsed earlier in this paper when discussing the differences between Wicked and Tame problems. By contrast, complicated contexts may contain multiple right answers and require leaders to sense, analyse and respond. In these circumstances, leaders must use inquiry to investigate potential solutions and avoid entrained thinking and decision paralysis. Snowden used the term complex to suggest there are some contexts in which it is not possible to see any solution whatsoever. This type of context is similar to the circumstances in which leaders and managers face Wicked problems. He suggests that to be successful, leaders must allow the path to reveal itself by experimenting with more than one potential solution and failing intelligently where success is not realised. For all the reasons outlined above leaders must avoid the distraction and seduction of early ill-fitting solutions. In chaotic contexts Snowden believes the search for a solution is pointless because turbulence is often too great to discern cause and effect. In these circumstances, leaders must create ‘holding spaces’ to transform chaos to complexity where it can be dealt with as above. The important lesson to emerge from Snowden’s work is that adept leaders and managers first of all identify the context in which they are operating and then choose the appropriate tools and behaviours to work with the grain rather than against it.
Case study – effective problem solving

Cwm Taf NHS Trust
One of the Trust’s hospitals, Prince Charles at Merthyr Tydfil is based in an area where twenty percent of the potential working population are in receipt of incapacity benefit. The hospital, however, in common with many of its service delivery partner organisations in the locality has a regular need for permanent staff at entry-level jobs but was having to fill these jobs through a complex system of temporary appointments, on an ad hoc basis and with regular wastage of investment into job training. Added to this, the job applicants were often long-term unemployed and suffered depression/stress problems and their desire to work was often contradicted by low self-confidence, hastening a return to unemployment and an endless drag on the efficiency of the hospital.

The response came from staff in the Trust. They realised, because they were also local residents that confidence was the core issue, so investing in training for locally unemployed people would make them more confident job applicants and much more likely to stay in work. This was done through workshops in modules delivered by the Trust and local partners, to standards monitored by the Trust. The tangible benefit for the Trust has been falling advertisement costs, dramatically lower sickness absence rates and the filling of vacancies has become much faster and far less burdened by bureaucracy.

The contradiction of simultaneous unemployment and vacancy levels is being resolved at the same time as the hiring process is made less complex for job applicant and employer alike. Cwm Taf displayed all the characteristics of learning from turbulence.

The learning gained from dealing with a crisis and operating in turbulent times is often the most valuable. It provides the opportunity to develop insight and skills into transforming situations that can then be applied in other circumstances and shared with others.

Some final thoughts and observations
Good leaders lead in the moment: they are agile, focused and courageous in the face of internal and external challenges. However, great leaders lead in the moment and reflect on lessons to carry with them in the future.

The accumulate knowledge and wisdom which they are able to access in a timely and purposeful way when faced with the unexpected.

As turbulence happens all around it will uproot the familiar and reveal fresh and exciting new ways of seeing things. The key goal is to develop an awareness of the potential of turbulence as a force for transformational change and for learning while managing its less positive impact upon the circumstances in which we work.

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Eight leadership strategies for surviving turbulent times

1 Be a role model for those who follow
The way you act and think will determine how others perceive you and respond. In a crisis, people look to those with authority, in management and leadership for meaning, to invest their trust and give them confidence. They soon dismiss ineffective or corrupt leadership. Are you acting with perspective and providing reassurance? Or are you feeding the frenzy of uncertainty and negativity? Maintaining perspective isn’t always easy, especially in today’s climate. Remember to occasionally detach yourself from the fray and get onto the balcony. Seeing the situation from a different perspective can help to clarify your role and make it easier for others to understand theirs. Following a leader is not a compulsory occupation. It is a choice on the part of the individual to put their trust in another.

To maintain perspective, you will need to take care of yourself. Manage your energy and your mood. Get more exercise, eat better, and improve your sleep. Stress management is closely connected to your emotional self-awareness. It is important you have a clear understanding of what you need physically and emotionally to maintain your wellbeing. Take time to reflect on your life choices. Do all of these things even when you feel unsure of their value or are concerned about what you might discover.

2 Be humble and remember your role is to serve others
Portraying oneself with humility is the cornerstone of winning unconditional respect from others. It is important not to be seduced by the idea that leadership and management comes with its own status and means knowing everything. Particularly when the problem is a Wicked one, admit you don’t have an answer if you don’t. Status only works when it is underwritten by respect.

Demonstrate that you are willing to let others take the lead and concentrate on giving them the stability and support that they need to do their very best. Get better
at being able to inspire Hot Spots, and let your people find their own hope and determination to pull through. Sometimes it isn’t the role of leaders and managers to rescue the situation but to allow others to determine their own solutions while feeling valued and supported.

3 Be visible and accessible
It is important to be seen during times of crisis. Don’t hide! Although you might feel like isolating yourself to create time to think, it is not a good leadership strategy during turbulence. Get out in front and communicate proactively with your colleagues, your team and your organisation. Acknowledge the emotional reactions that employees are feeling—especially the stress that comes with uncertainty. At the same time, communicate your confidence in their abilities to manage the challenges ahead.

Use your engagement with others as an opportunity to learn and understand how others feel and what you can do to make a difference.

4 Deal with team dynamics
During times of turbulence when complexity and stress can cause confusion and doubt, negative team dynamics can surface. This can manifest itself as scape-goating, disaffection, cynicism and distrust. As a leader, you need to understand that people’s behavior in difficult times is often very different from the usual. Work with your team to help them understand what is in their control, what they can influence, and what they can’t. Help them to release their own unique abilities and liberate their imaginations. Now is not a time for finger pointing and blaming, rather it is a time for leveraging the strengths of the team. When conflict surfaces, deal with it in an open-handed and fair way. Don’t let it fester or become a breeding ground for criticism or dissention. Let those you work with take responsibility for their own actions and avoid developing parent-child relationships.
5 Innovate
Actively search for new ways of doing things and encourage those you work with to look for solutions beyond the pale of convention. Reframe problems to understand them from a different perspective and help create new ways of knowing. Road test new ideas in a way that will help individuals to understand the concept of intelligent failure. Make it permissible for individuals to fail without fear of punishment or retribution but actively encouraging them to think through some of the consequences of things going wrong and mitigating their effects in advance. Take practical steps to create a climate of innovation by developing an innovations board or a regular free thinking innovations session. Remember to create the space for innovation by protecting time and encouraging individuals to use new thinking technologies. Lead by example and demonstrate to others how to let go of some of the preconceptions and ideas that may have confined thinking in the past. Help others to recognise that turbulence can be used as a positive energy to generate a new dynamic and create flow.

6 Collaborate and build communities
In times of turbulence, leaders and managers often seek to fortify and protect their own circumstances and environments from others. This can sometimes be about the management or avoidance of unnecessary risk and the desire to trust others less. Sometimes the typical response in a crisis is for leaders to batten down the hatches and shut out all but their own part of the organisation. Although this provides focus, it also reinforces silos and sends a message that anything or anyone new is unwelcome. In tough times, you need allies and to pull together in a connected and collegiate way. Solving problems and dealing with the adversity often associated with turbulence is much more likely to be successful with the involvement of others. This can be an opportunity to build new alliances and deepen relationships of trust based upon mutual dependence.
7 Engage people
Engaging others is vital to managing and leading in turbulent times. Individuals can become distracted and disaffected easily in circumstances where they feel vulnerable and subject to forces outside of their control. Demonstrating empathy and understanding for others will help to convey a sense of value and appreciation. Finding ways to empower individuals to make decisions and affect change will create opportunities for engaging with others. Creating a culture that removes the distractions which paralyse people, like blame and negativity can help to bolster morale and promote personal responsibility. Even in tough times, exceptional customer service, efficient and effective work processes are all still important. Give everyone something meaningful to do and from which they can see the difference they make.

8 Act decisively
Although it is important not to rush to make decisions, it will be important to act decisively and in a timely way. The vacuum of uncertainty that often surrounds turbulent times will be filled by doubt and panic. But it is not the time for rigid, inflexible solutions either – they will also spread deep unrest when they fail to deliver the outcomes expected by others. Instead, try to understand the whole experience using your inquiry skills, trust the wisdom you have accumulated and see the bigger picture to think your decisions through before acting decisively.

In the majority of instances the information you have accumulated and your instincts will lead you in the right direction towards making decisions that if not in whole but in part help to create a positive impact. They will also help to engender trust and confidence in your leadership and management behaviour. When your initial decision doesn’t work, or when circumstances shift, correct your course quickly but openly. A crisis is no time to stay stubbornly committed to a bad course of action; demonstrate you can (and do) learn.
...To live so that which comes to me as seed goes to the next as blossom
That which comes to me as blossom goes on as fruit.

Dawna Markova

Reference & research
2. Presence: Exploring profound change in people, organizations and society, Nicholas Brealey Publishing
4. Sharmer, C Otto (2009), Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges

The seeds of ideas become the basis on which we grow our knowledge and understanding, in turn, enabling us to develop the organisations in which we work.

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