Leading and Managing
Policy Teams

We have all attended, or will attend, innumerable training programs, lectures, away-days and the rest aimed at improving the way we run our organisations. It took me a long time to realise that the better trainers all said very much the same things, albeit in different ways and using different words. And most of the more valuable lessons applied equally to the private, public and third sectors. Indeed, I have been involved in a number of programs attended by managers from all three sectors, and (after initial mutual suspicion) it has always been the case that they quickly learn that they face very similar problems.

These notes accordingly summarise the key lessons imparted by the best leadership and management trainers. Reading these notes will not exempt you from attending such training, but will hopefully help you make sense of it. They will also help you identify the rubbish advice that is offered by the less effective trainers (and your less effective senior managers).

But please bear in mind that these notes do not, and cannot, reflect the unrelenting pace at which modern managers are expected to work. Good managers are supposed to be reflective, organised, rational and plan-oriented. Real managers' work is characterised by brevity, variety and discontinuity. A study of CEOs found that half of managers' activities lasted less than nine minutes. A study of British middle and top managers found that they worked uninterrupted for more than 30 minutes only about once every two days.

Similarly, good managers are trained to empower and delegate. They are told to be like good conductors: they orchestrate everything in advance and then monitor the results. In practice, of course, managers have a number of regular duties that only they can perform. It is a natural part of a manager's job to meet important customers/stakeholders, attend retirement parties, meet government officials (or vice versa), and so on. These duties cannot be delegated.

So, although the following advice is sound, it cannot help you find the right mixture of leadership, planning, empowerment, change management and so on that will fit your particular circumstances. But it will certainly help reduce the number of mistakes that you make.

Speaking of which, management is a bit like driving. It's all about taking decisions, often every few seconds – how to react, what tone to adopt, when to change the subject. However hard we try, some of our judgements will be wrong, but hopefully inconsequentially so. Good managers, like good drivers, simply make fewer faulty decisions than others. And firm but fair managers can apologise and move on, for their colleagues recognise their worth and forgive the occasional blemish. Unpopular, unfair managers find that their mistakes are leapt upon as evidence of their inadequacy.

Leadership

Leadership is about who you are.

Management is about what you do.

Sir Michael Bichard, a former Permanent Secretary, draws a clear distinction between managers and leaders:

Managers who control their organisations effectively may enable them to survive. But it is the leaders who create a sense of purpose and direction, and who analyse, anticipate and inspire.

Strong leadership is therefore essential if your team is to be innovative, efficient and successful. And yet one of the minor mysteries of the modern world is why there are so few effective leaders – in both the public and private sectors – when there is so much advice available in so many different books and courses. Indeed, they all say pretty much the same sort of thing which is that **leaders are different** from their followers. They tell their people that they are different, and they behave as if they are different. They can answer the following questions from anyone at any time:

- Where are we going?
- Why are we going there?
- How will we get there?

Effective leaders have **courage, clarity and humanity**. In more detail, they always have a good number if not all of the following attributes. They:

- have a remorseless iron determination to make things happen;
- have an unshakeable inner conviction;
- lead decisively and confidently;
- constantly promote the same message;
- are different;
- have at least one weakness;
- provide a role model and set an example;
- keep things simple;
- are a little theatrical;
- are authoritative and respected;
- are committed to their team;
- accept blame;
- are honest
- are physically and mentally resilient, and
- take risks.

Simple, eh? And many leaders do have a good number of the above attributes. But my own observation, for what it is worth, is that too few are sufficiently *remorseless, committed, and honest.* Let me explain what I mean …

Remorselessness

The first and most important characteristic of a leader is remorselessness. This takes two forms.
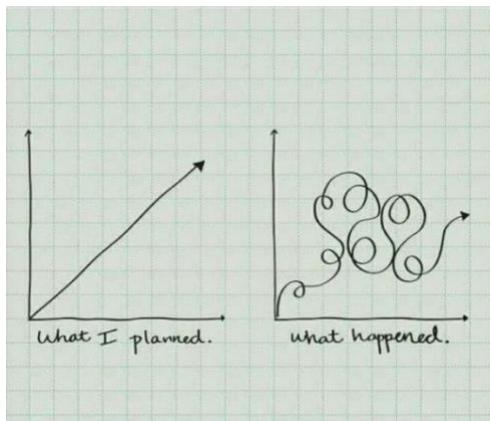
First, leaders feel no remorse when they make mistakes, when things do not go according to plan, or when some innovation fails to work. They recognise that they are dealing with humans, not machines, and human behaviour is highly unpredictable. Remorse and guilt are understandable, but quite unnecessary, even if something does not work in the way you expected.

Second, leaders are remorseless (in the sense of relentless) because they know that every improvement will take two or three times as long as they expect it to. But they don't let this stop them. Instead, they keep plugging away and eventually they and their teams achieve levels of performance that others can only dream of.

Commitment

Different situations call for different styles of leadership. Sometimes decisions need to be made very quickly and obeyed without question. But leaders nowadays almost always need the consent of those that they lead. Management consultants Kouzes and Posner describe leadership as 'a reciprocal relationship between those who choose to lead and those who decide to follow,'

Modern leaders therefore need to be a cross between an old-fashioned captain of a ship and someone who is running for office. It follows that newly appointed leaders should go out of their way to get themselves elected – i.e. respected by their teams – in the first few days after their appointment. This simple fact does not seem to be understood by many colleagues.

If you are to be elected leader then you must commit to the team, with all its strengths and weaknesses. This is particularly important in the civil service if only because you are unlikely to be around long enough to replace them. And the civil service is anyway so large that, by definition, it has to employ a cross-section of the population. Of course, you do not need put up with mediocrity or laziness. But you cannot insist on surrounding yourself with energetic geniuses. Your task is to get the best out of those who work for you, without forever wishing yourself somewhere else.

How do you show your commitment? You should:

- be very visible, in particular by walking about;
- set a good example, including by complying with rules and standards that have been set for your team;

- champion the team e.g. by defending them against unfair criticism, but also
- respond to fair criticism, whether of you or your team, in particular by putting matters right and by ensuring that the problem does not recur.

More generally, good managers and leaders tend to spend more time with their direct reports than do other managers - and bad managers spend very little time. This all seems very obvious but a middle manager friend of mine told me that three weeks passed before her newly appointed Senior Civil Servant (Deputy Director) boss got round to meeting her, and she had yet to meet her Director after six months in the job. So some colleagues still have something to learn about visibility, commitment and leadership.

Honesty

According to Lucy Kellaway, writing in *the Financial Times*, a good leader knows exactly when to be straight, when to be economical with the truth, when to lay it on with a trowel, and when to dissemble. This is absolutely right, but most of us spend too much time dissembling and too little time being honest with our staff. In particular, we have to be honest in making it clear to staff that they are employed for no other reason than to help the leader achieve his or her objectives. However much they like working together, the team must be directed to achieving a common goal. Everyone is then much better directed and motivated. Those who skirt round this fundamental truth simply waste time and create confused expectations.

Effective leaders also give clear and honest feedback to their staff – not all the time, but frequently enough to be effective. Any sustained failure to give honest feedback to colleagues – and of course we have all failed to some extent, and regretted it – can only end in disappointment, confusion and demoralisation. Honest appraisal is also a necessary companion to empowerment. Once the manager has defined the job that is to be done, he or she should aim to keep out of the way and let his or her staff do what is expected of them. But there must be regular informal and formal appraisal to ensure that the work stays on track.

But …

The problem with my pen picture of an effective leader is that it equally well describes Winston Churchill and Adolf Hitler; Nelson Mandela and Stalin. So some leaders are qualitatively better than others. What marks them out? It is clearly the **values** that they promote, and the boundaries that they set.

Different organisations inevitably have somewhat different values, though new leaders could do much worse than adopt those of Netflix, [summarised here](#).

But values are of little use if they are merely written down – and swiftly ignored or forgotten. Good leaders lead by example, rather than by coercion. I like the quote attributed to St Francis of Assisi: "*Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words".*

Bad leaders, in contrast:

- talk a good game, but have no impact
- make everything look great while they are there - but everything falls apart after they leave
- improve financial performance whilst having no impact on the organisation's other results - such as exam performance in schools or medical outcomes in hospitals
- are decisive and incisive - achieving 'quick wins' but neglecting the investment and other factors that lead to long term success.

The best leaders carry out a difficult balancing act. On the one hand they are obsessive about setting the correct boundaries and establishing the right culture. On the other hand, they empower and support. Those who get it right can usually then stand back and watch their team achieve surprising results.

And the best leaders know that they most likely to achieve 80% of their impact in 20% of their time. It is of course difficult to identify that 20%, but don't fool yourself into thinking that very long hours will make a great deal of difference. They are much more likely to blunt your effectiveness.

One final point about leadership:- Contrary to popular belief, you don't need to be tall and handsome to be seen by others as a natural leader. But strength, or resilience, certainly helps. Most of us would, for instance, follow this man anywhere:

Management

Leadership and management are inseparable – the two sides of the same coin – and yet quite different. Leadership is about who you are. Management is about what you do. Management is the process of achieving your aims by getting the most of out the resources at your disposal, and in particular getting the most out of your team.

Most processes involve the following:

- Establish the identity of your customer: the person (a Minister?) that you are trying to please – not necessarily (or usually) the person who is managing you.
- Establish (with your customer) your **aims** and **objectives**. How will the customer know whether you have done what (s)he wanted?
- Choose an appropriate **strategy** – best thought of as the route that will most efficiently get you to your objective – and then develop a more detailed plan, at least for the first few stages.
- Identify what resources you will need and, in particular ...
- Create and motivate an appropriate team.
- Measure progress towards the objective, using milestones as necessary.
- Revise the strategy and plan as and when necessary.

Let's now look at Strategy, Aims and Objectives in more detail.

<u>Strategy</u>

Vague aims, vision statements and the rest seldom assist either managers or those they manage. "We are going to be the best in the world at what we do" is not a strategy. It is a vague ambition. And words like *synergy* and *customer-centric* add nothing to the sum of human knowledge.

Your organisation may have its own strategy or vision. Your job is to translate it into something that makes sense, and that inspires you and the people working with you. Do not hesitate to re-frame a vague corporate strategy to make it more relevant to what you do.

Strategy requires making choices. Once you think you have written it down, identify what it means you will not do. If you can't do this then you have a pretty meaningless jumble of words.

A good strategy will generally include:

1. A diagnosis that defines the challenge that you face.
2. A guiding approach or route map which will help you deal with the challenge.
3. A set of coherent actions and objectives consistent with '1' and '2'.

<u>Aims and Objectives</u>

The aims and objectives of individual staff members should if possible be 'SMART', i.e. Specific, Measurable, Agreed, Realistic and Time-dependent. And they should be kept simple and relevant to the person who owns them. For instance, few of us can cope with more than three tiers of Aims, Objectives and Targets. And whilst an *objective* of the Permanent Secretary of the Home Office* might be to cut crime, or keep it to a certain figure, this would become part of the *aim* of more junior officials who might be responsible for the Police Pension Scheme. The important thing is that those in charge of the pension scheme should know that it needs to be so designed that it will attract and retain high

calibre police officers (and that is their quantifiable objective) in order that those officers might in turn cut crime.

If anyone has difficulty in accepting worthwhile objectives, as distinct from day to day targets and activities, it is helpful to ask them what would change, or how they and their team would be missed, if they did not exist. Alternatively, the line manager should complete the sentence beginning "*You will be a success if you …*". I have yet to meet anyone who has, when challenged in this way, failed to justify their employment in terms of meaningful objectives.

And take care! Objectives are powerful things, especially when linked (as they should be) to appraisal. Get them wrong and your whole organisation will go off in the wrong direction. Take particular care if you are tempted to define your objectives in monetary terms. This approach can sometimes be very effective. Equally, it can turn you all into novice accountants, quite oblivious to your wider or longer-term responsibilities. See also the advice on measurement in the section on planning, below.

Although the job plan should emphasise the importance of achieving worthwhile objectives, rather than the ability to demonstrate a range of grade-related skills or behaviour, it should also make it clear what levels of skill, effort and achievement represent satisfactory performance. This will help those who wish to show that their performance has been much better than satisfactory. It can also be useful to deploy the concept of 'breakthrough performance' when trying to explain the difference between what is in the civil service generally known as 'Box 2' rather than 'Box 3' (i.e. satisfactory) performance.

Although I always write the first draft of the person's objectives, the document obviously has to be shown in draft to the person being managed. In particular, I have often found it helpful to ask colleagues to say, in effect, what they offer to do by way of satisfactory performance. This can help dispel unreal expectations that satisfactory performance somehow deserves of an exceptional report. Indeed, I take the firm view that Box 2 breakthrough performance cannot be recognised in the absence of a clear agreement between manager and managed which specifies the level of performance that has been exceeded.

For Civil Servants only:-

> Civil servants have traditionally drafted their own objectives or job plan. This approach was unfortunately enshrined in official guidance when objectives-setting was first introduced in 1986. Why 'unfortunately'? It is surely axiomatic that managers should take responsibility for defining what jobs they want done, what sort of person they want to do them and what standard of performance is expected. This should be clearly set out in a document which draws as necessary on the department's and directorate's written objectives, and should in the first instance be drafted by the manager, not the managed. After all, who else but the manager can in the first instance say why a particular individual is employed within their team?

And too many civil servants default to job descriptions that are all about what people do ('I give policy advice . . .', 'I manage . . .') rather than what they are trying to achieve. The usual response, of course, is that things like the health of an industry, or of the population, are dependent upon so many variables that it is positively unfair to credit any one civil servant with their improvement. There is of course some truth in this, but it is also true that a great deal of effort will be wasted unless it is directed towards an identifiable (even if distant) objective. Also, the adoption of challenging and worthwhile objectives leads quickly to innovation, team working and other good practices.

But note that it is genuinely difficult for some **senior officials** to be explicit about their and hence their Ministers' objectives, for Ministers will often *either* refuse to be specific (for fear of being seen to fail) *or* will announce some dramatic objective which, within days, appears imprecise or unattainable. Therefore, although most senior officials, from Permanent Secretary down, nowadays have written objectives, they are often meaningless. The good and bad reasons for this are discussed further here.

Planning and Measurement

Having set your objectives, you must now plan how you will get there.

Planning is of course an unnatural process. It is, after all, much more fun to do something. And the other nice thing about not planning is that failure comes as a complete surprise rather than being preceded by a period of worry and depression. But experienced managers know that planning is (a) relatively simple (which is perhaps another reason why it does not appeal to many civil servants) and (b) an indispensable precursor to success. The main thing, therefore, is to do it! But when you do it, these are the key points that need to be borne in mind.

- Keep it simple;
- Focus on results, i.e. what is to be achieved;
- Ensure individual responsibility for all members of the team, preferably by managing through a structured breakdown of the project into constituent parts which are the responsibility of named individuals;
- Communicate, and in particular clearly communicate both objectives and progress both within and outside the team;
- Monitor progress both carefully and frequently.

Much of the above implies measurement. This lies at the heart of effective management, whether of the policy process or of anything else. We all know – though we often forget – that 'you cannot manage what you do not measure'. Another version of this saying is that 'If you measure it, you change it' - which leads to the conclusion that you should 'Make the important measurable, not the measurable important.' This really is the key to success in all your endeavours, and time spent on unmeasured activity is the most likely time that is being wasted.

Do not be tempted to organise long and complicated staff or customer surveys. Five questions, with answers on a 10-point scale, will often do quite nicely. Customers, for instance, might be asked about the extent to which your team understand their needs, helps them achieve results, handles their matters efficiently, keeps them informed, and uses initiative on their behalf.

Building Successful Teams

Much has been written about how to create and build successful teams, but Judy Foster (author of *Building Effective Social Network Teams*) summarised it very well when she stressed that there are five key enabling factors:

1. Coherent policies
2. Effective professional development
3. A sense of autonomy: the ability to innovate in response to customers' needs
4. Sound support structures, including well-run and genuinely participative management meetings
5. Sufficient mental space to be able to process difficult emotional situations, see clearly and think creatively. This includes supportive supervision provided by more experienced colleagues.

Judy's research showed that mental space is particularly vital – and in short supply in some of the social work teams that she studied. I suspect that much the same can be said of many civil service teams who spend too much time attending inefficient meetings and/or fire-fighting in response to short-term pressures, and taking far too little time to think clearly and creatively.

<u>Does Morale Matter?</u>

Morale, just like happiness, can be surprisingly elusive. It is a great mistake to try directly to improve morale. Good morale comes naturally to any well-managed team, and never comes to a team that is poorly led, lacks clear objectives, is poorly trained or lacks good honest communication. So, if you are lead and manage well, high morale will inevitably follow, however difficult the surrounding circumstances.

Do also bear in mind that morale will inevitably dip during a period of rapid change. The team does not at first realise that it needs to change. (This state is sometimes unkindly referred to as '*unconscious incompetence*'.) Once it faces up to its problems then confidence and morale will inevitably decline ('*conscious incompetence*'). It will then begin to do better, although perhaps rather self-consciously ('*conscious competence*') and finally morale will rise rapidly once the new way of working has become second nature ('*unconscious competence*'). It is then the job of the leader to ensure that this state is maintained for as long as possible, through seeking continuous improvement, so that the team does not slip back into unconscious incompetence.

Establishing a Good Culture

Leaders set the tone of the organisation – even in small but important ways. For instance, I hope that any visitor to my office will find that we are open, informal and hospitable. We feel that it makes a real difference if we are friendly and polite to each other, and offer refreshments and other courtesies to visitors. We in particular welcome the opportunity to talk about our work, and our approach to our work, and welcome visits from colleagues from Embassies, from industrialists, from students and from teachers.

I also expect everyone to recognise their responsibility for the safety, health and well-being of themselves and all their colleagues. We take the alarm bells seriously, even if we suspect that they are a false alarm. We take seriously all reports of sexual harassment, racial or sexual discrimination, or bullying. We give unquestioning support to colleagues who express concern about safety, harassment or discrimination. Above all, we do not ask colleagues to work so hard that they become stressed or over-tired. This is not only unethical, but it leads to mistakes and misjudgements – which in turn create more pressure.

Next, I encourage everyone to be **customer-focused**, where our customers are defined as the immediate beneficiaries of particular pieces of work. If you are preparing a briefing, your customer is the person who will use it. If you are organising a meeting, your customers will be those who attend the meeting. Our customers should be the sole and decisive judge of the quality of our work. The test is not whether we think that our work meets the requirements of the customer, but whether the customer is satisfied.

This implies measurement (again!)**.** You cannot tell whether your customer is satisfied unless you have asked him or her in a structured way. It should become second nature that your plans and your day-to-day work are driven by the expressed needs of your customers.

Measurement in turn drives **continuous improvement**. You and your team should constantly be looking out for ways – usually quite small in themselves – in which you could improve the satisfaction of the customer, or do the job more efficiently or effectively. The cumulative effort of many small improvements can be very noticeable indeed. Conversely, a cumulative failure to improve will eventually and inevitably lead to your customers feeling dissatisfied with the service that you are providing. It follows that imitation is a virtue. If you hear of a good idea, or see something working well, you should not hesitate to copy it so as to improve the service that you are providing to your customers. And if you run out of ideas for improvements, you should benchmark your team against another team or organisation. You will probably be surprised at what you find.

Continuous improvement in turn requires a **no fault culture**. We assume that everyone is trying to do a good job, within the limits of their skills, training and experience. Management gurus often say that 'customers' complaints are jewels to be treasured'. This is a bit over the top for most of us, but it is certainly true that complaints should never be ignored, and a single complaint often represents the tip of an iceberg of unvoiced dissatisfaction. Quality conscious organisations are therefore usually obsessive about investigating and resolving customer complaints, whether from internal or external customers. And complaints should never be used as a stick with which to beat your staff or

other colleagues. If mistakes are made, or if quality standards are not met, then the person involved should be given clearer instructions or better training, or attention must be given to the process that they were carrying out, or to whether they are in an appropriate job. (This judgement should not be arrived at lightly, but neither should it be ducked. If necessary, the person must be moved to a job that they can do.)

Setting Boundaries

It is vitally important that leaders should establish the ethical, financial, legal and other boundaries within which their colleagues should work. Problems (and sometimes severe problems) arise when these are not explicit or, even worse, when senior managers appear themselves not to respect those boundaries. It is particularly important that civil servants should operate within the ethical, financial and legal boundaries laid down by Parliament and it is odd, to say the least, that it is difficult to find a written statement of these. I hope that other parts of this website go some way to defining the ethical etc. boundaries of which I am aware. It follows that I require everyone who works with me to respect these boundaries and to require all their staff to do the same.

Many boundaries are cultural, rather than ethical, in the sense that leaders are responsible for establishing the parameters within which staff deal with each other, with customers, with work pressures and so on. It is worth noting that some staff will constantly test your boundaries and force your intervention when the boundaries are likely to be breached. They will accuse you of micro-management. Other staff will respect your boundaries, and get on with their jobs with very little intervention from yourself. But they may as a result worry that you are not interested in them or their work area. It is therefore important that you explain your approach, and reassure those who think you have taken empowerment just a little too far.

Empowerment

Empowerment is often confused with delegation. Delegation often means no more than that the delegate is simply told what to do and how to do it. Empowerment is better because it allows the colleague to choose how best to achieve his or her objectives and targets. Leaders don't delegate. They empower.

But beware the Principal-Agent problem. Staff need to be properly incentivised to work to clearly specified objectives and targets, which they may not vary without consulting their boss and/or customer. They must also work within other constraints laid down by the manager, including appropriate professional standards, standard procedures, quality standards and financial constraints. You should help them gain experience by empowering them, monitoring their performance and acting to relax the constraints as soon as you can.

For Civil Servants only:-

> In particular, submissions, draft letters etc. should be prepared by the person, however junior, best equipped to prepare a first draft. If the issue is not novel or contentious, and the person is appropriately experienced and trained, then there

should be no need for the work to be countersigned by anyone else. Two heads are however better than one if an issue is novel or contentious. A senior colleague who countersigns work in these circumstances should concentrate on the substance of the work, and the way it will appear to Ministers or the recipients of letters etc. They should pay relatively little attention to the detail, style or grammar of the work.

Work should also be countersigned if the action officer is being trained or gaining experience. It is helpful in these circumstances if the countersigning officer pays attention both to the substance of the work and to the detail, style and grammar. The objective of this intervention should, however, be to train the colleague so that countersignature is in due course not necessary.

Recruitment

Recruitment has to be taken enormously seriously. Get it wrong and you'll have a nightmare few months or years trying to correct your error. Get it right and your job becomes much easier.

But it is very hard to get it right, partly because we are often reluctant to spell out exactly what attributes we don't want, as well as what we do want. There is, for instance, plenty of room for shy, retiring, academic individuals in some policy-making teams, but many policy jobs require staff to be friendly, self-starting, clear communicators and so on. These attributes need if necessary to be spelt out and appraised, or else you will end up appointing an unemployable genius - great at completing crosswords but quite incapable of making decisions or managing fellow humans with all their faults and frailties.

It must be recognised, too, that recruitment is inevitably risky because you don't have a lot of time to get to know all the candidates before appointment. You must therefore be ready to accept that some appointments will not work, through no fault on the part of you or the appointee.

But here are some thoughts that might help you cut the error rate.

General Advice

- Take care to ensure that the job description and person specification are comprehensive. If you need the appointee to be friendly, approachable and flexible, then this needs to be spelt out in advance. Equally, if the job can be filled by a shy, backroom sort of person, then other attributes will need to be stressed. You may find Nancy Holloway's questions useful in framing both the person specification and subsequent lines of questioning – see Annex.
- Do encourage genuine diversity. Your approach should <u>not</u> be "*Come in and we'll show you how to be like us*". It should be "*Come in … and now we are a new*

organisation". Even today, women seeking promotion often feel the need to be 'the right sort of chap' in both background and behaviour. This needs to stop.

- Similarly, do not demand sophisticated drafting skills from everyone. There is a marked waste of talent in many departments because good managers, good networkers (especially with those in industry), good 'deliverers', and many professionals are deemed unsuited to working closely with Ministers.
- Take care not to be fooled by embellished and exaggerated CVs, but do take oral references in advance of discussion/interview. Having learned from bitter experience, I would not appoint to a middle-ranking or senior position without taking a quite deep prior reference. Some candidates cannot supply these for good reasons, but others cannot provide them because they have been dismissed for incompetence or worse. It is seldom worth taking the risk. (I learned this the hard way.)
- Equally, do take a moment to think about the motivation of the referee. Some managers are trying to get rid of poor quality staff, and hope you will end up holding this particular damaged parcel. And some will bad mouth staff who do not fit their particular mould, although you might rather welcome a recruit who is a little out of the ordinary.
- Do not downplay the difficult aspects of the job for which you are recruiting. Many public-facing positions, for instance, and jobs in Ministers' offices, are very stressful, as are jobs (such as some regulatory jobs) whose outputs are subject to intense scrutiny, including by the courts. The need for these positions to be filled by robust personalities must be spelt out to all candidates as it is no kindness to them (or you) if they are appointed to a job in which they cannot succeed.
- Unless you feel that the candidate will be uncomfortable working for you, do not hesitate to recruit people who are more experienced than you - or have useful different experience.
- If the candidate needs a particular skill, make sure you thoroughly test them to ensure they have it.
- But don't require academic qualifications unless absolutely necessary. An experienced person who opted out of post-16 or higher education will often out-perform those who studied longer.
- You sometimes need to find someone who will shake up an organisation. Private sector friends of mine - who often serve together on interview panels - ask each other "Is (s)he life threatening?" ! (The right answer is "yes'.)
- Psychometric testing is almost always a waste of time.

And there was this sensible advice from Head of the Civil Service, Mark Sedwill, speaking in 2019:

> Of course, people have to get jobs on a meritocratic basis, but you will often find at the end of an appointment process … that if it comes down to the last two people, you can't really say 'this one's better than this one'."

> At that point, a leader should consider who is "a better fit right now". That might mean when an agency's leader moves on, for example, their replacement should have a different leadership style because the agency has evolved.

[And remember that] … often the people who are working for you are better at what they're doing than you would be.

By the way – never, ever, let your HR department make decisions for you – even (indeed especially) at the preliminary sift stage. They will too readily sift out that unusual, left-field but exciting candidate, maybe without exactly the right qualifications, that would transform your team.

Interviews

- Interviews should be conversations, not interrogations. Respond to, and if necessary challenge, what the candidate says. Make sure you understand why they have given an apparently odd answer to one of your questions.
- Do not put too much weight on performance in the traditional 45-minute interview. Some candidates think much more quickly than others, and/or are more able to express their thoughts orally. These may be important attributes - but in many cases you will be better off appointing a deeper thinker, or someone who takes time to order their thoughts in way that allows them to communicate more clearly - especially in writing.
- It is much better, therefore, to arrange for short-listed candidates to have two discussions (not 'interviews') with two different halves of a four-person recruitment panel. These feel more relaxing for the candidate and can allow issues to be explored in greater depth. This facilitates a much deeper investigation of the candidates' interests, character, strengths and weaknesses. This may seem time consuming, but it is a lot less time consuming than dealing with the aftermath of a less than optimal appointment.
- It is best to rank candidates in advance of final discussion/interview based on a careful (and sceptical/evidence based) review of their achievements in previous jobs. The discussions can then be used to test the accuracy of the ranking rather than as an event on which the whole process hinges.
- There is no 'equal opportunities' need to ask all candidates the same questions. Interviews should be tailored so as to tests the candidate's likely strengths and weaknesses. Although the job specification is the same for all candidates, their experience and apparent strengths will vary, so your questions need to vary if you are to accurately assess their suitability for the job.
- If an experienced manager with a good track record has a strong (and likely negative) hunch about a candidate, listen to that person and explore the concern in depth.

(Don't forget that civil servants must be appointed on merit through fair and open competition. Further detail is here.)

And please try to avoid silly application forms. Can it be true (I fear it was) that judges - applying for high office - must provide an example of how they behaved with integrity? And mixed marriages/partnerships mean that many applicants are finding it hard to complete ethnic monitoring forms. Don't forget that 55% of Londoners are not 'White British'.

Remember, too, that recruitment needs to be followed by effective, targeted **induction**. This is too often neglected, especially in the case of senior appointments; this is one of the reasons why I created my Understanding the Civil Service and Understand Regulation websites.

> (It is particularly important that new entrants to the civil service are introduced to the Civil Service Code, and come to understand its importance and implications. There should be no question of local mission statements or departmental core values overriding the provisions of the code.)

Feedback, Criticism & Staff Appraisal

The value of formal performance management systems is frequently questioned by both academics and HR specialists. Informal appraisal is certainly much more effective, perhaps along the lines summarised in the book *The One Minute Manager*. This suggests that managers should give immediate feedback whenever they see good or bad work. Unfortunately, too many managers give immediate feedback that is either always positive (and therefore dishonest) or always negative (which is debilitating). Colleagues quickly learn to appreciate the honesty of the manager who gives both sorts of feedback.

Negative feedback should be delivered carefully, taking great account of your relationship with the person whose performance you hope to improve. If you don't know them too well, perhaps because they haven't worked for you for very long, you should generally – if possible - start by offering a compliment about work done well, or simply an acknowledgement that you haven't yet seen much of their work but … something concerns you. Some experienced managers recommend *bookending* or *sandwich criticism* – both starting and finishing with something positive. The reason for both these approaches is that, if you start with a negative, your colleague's defences will go up and they won't properly hear what you are saying.

 But the positives in the above approaches can too often be seen as insincere window dressing so – if you can – try instead to engage in a tactful, honest and mature conversation which shows that you are sensitive to the other person's feelings and genuinely want them to change/improve.

Despite widespread doubts about the value of formal appraisal systems, most of us find that we are forced to take part in them, both as manager and managed. I have accordingly prepared separate advice which you will find here: https://www.policy-making.org.uk/performance_management.html

See also **Annex B**, below, for advice on how to deal with accusations of **bullying and harassment**, including those that arise during performance management

Further Reading

As well as the books mentioned above, I recommend Tony Rossiter's book *Management Basics* as a very readable combination of plain common sense and the kind of unofficial tips that are rarely written down but which go a long way towards making a decent and effective manager.

And some off-the-record advice from HR professionals is at Annex C

Martin Stanley

ANNEX A

Interview Questions

Many civil service job advertisements require candidates to be good team-workers, have good communication and interpersonal skills etc. etc. But what does this mean in practice? The late Nancy Holloway offered the following definitions which others might find both helpful in designing questions, and also thought-provoking.

Teamwork/flexibility

- Are you a friendly and approachable colleague and will you get on with the team you are in and the wider culture, including working with other teams without any problem, and freely sharing information?
- Will you be happy to have new bits of work thrown at you/work to a different boss from time to time/work in project management style in different teams with people from around office?

Communication/interpersonal skills

- Can you write well?
- Can you speak coherently and (for more senior posts) compellingly when briefing or presenting information?
- Can you organise your thoughts and present them in concise manner that you're your message across in plain English?
- Do you relate well to other humans (as opposed to machines etc.) and are you able to strike the right note with external stakeholders in meetings/phone etc.?
- Can you read others well, and respond appropriately?

Management/organisational skills

- Can you manage other people without either diving in too deeply and doing their work for them or leaving them without guidance?
- Are you selfish about claiming credit or can you coach and help others develop?
- Can you work in a no-blame culture but still get people to perform?
- Can you organise your own work/work to deadlines?

- Can you juggle conflicting priorities?
- Can you use IT well and manage paperwork?

Analytical skills/ability to deal with complex information and data/solution focused

- Are you able to stand back from an issue, pick out important issues in problem you're dealing with, find solutions/ways forward?
- Are you able to relate your issues to those others within the office are dealing with and to the bigger picture for the organisation as a whole including corporate aims and objectives?
- Are you able to sift through large quantities of information or data and quickly see problem areas?
- Are you able to present a coherent and well-argued solution/way forward?

Self-starter/ability to work on own initiative/multi-tasker

- Are you the sort of person that doesn't sit and wait for someone to tell you what to do, has ideas, is quick to learn, make suggestions for improvements, and get on with work on your own without constant supervision and advice?
- Are you able to think on your feet and respond to changing situations?
- Are you able to juggle a number of things at once and be able to work out which is most important/urgent?
- Do you know when to ask for help and from whom?

Representational skills [if appropriate]

- Will you be able to represent the organisation in public or at meetings with stakeholders?
- Will you be able to demonstrate an understanding of issues around office and an ability to relate them coherently to others?
- Are you able to hold your own when briefing senior people?

Regulatory aptitude [if appropriate]

- Are you comfortable with both collaborating and confronting people/issues with external stakeholders, and do you know when to choose the correct one of these approaches?
- Do you feel comfortable with economic concepts and working with economists?
- Do you feel comfortable with working within a legal framework which controls the limits of what you can do and working with lawyers?
- Can you see around corners and anticipate trouble before it happens?
- Do you have a questioning mind that doesn't just accept things you're told at face value?
- Can you negotiate with difficult people?

ANNEX B

Bullying, Harassment
and
Performance Management

Dame Laura Cox QC published a report in 2018 into bullying and harassment in the Palace of Westminster. It contained some very helpful general advice and definitions, especially for managers (a) who receive complaints of bullying, or (b) who are concerned that they may be accused of bullying when trying to improve the performance of their staff. The following text is taken almost verbatim from Dame Laura's report.

What is Bullying?

The report contained two useful definitions of bullying:

- Behaviour that cannot be objectively justified by a reasonable code of conduct, and whose likely or actual cumulative effect is to threaten, undermine, constrain, humiliate or harm another person or their property, reputation, self-esteem, self-confidence or ability to perform.

- Offensive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behaviour, an abuse or misuse of power through means intended to undermine, humiliate, denigrate or injure the recipient.

The report noted that bullying or harassment:

- may be by an individual (perhaps by someone in a position of authority such as a manager or supervisor) or involve groups of people.
- may be obvious or it may be insidious.
- may be persistent or an isolated incident.
- can also occur in written communications, by phone or through email, not just face to face.

Whatever form it takes, bullying is unwarranted and unwelcome to the individual.

Performance Management

Staff who are facing criticism of their performance may feel that they are being bullied by their critical manager. The report offered this sensible advice:

When introducing new standards of performance, a good manager will usually involve all the members of the team in agreeing them, rather than seek to impose them without discussion and with accompanying threats of disciplinary action if they are not met.

Positive contributions and improvements in performance will be monitored, acknowledged and rewarded openly, rather than dealt with arbitrarily, involving obvious acts of favouritism, or just ignored altogether.

A failure by someone to achieve the required standards will be dealt with initially as a performance-improvement issue, the employee being treated with civility throughout and with the provision of appropriate support, rather than pressure to conform being exerted using sarcasm, ridicule, threats or humiliation, often in the presence of others in the team.

An under-performing employee should know from the start that their performance is under investigation, and why, rather than learning only after the event that it has been under investigation for some time, and that disciplinary action is now imminent.

Comment: This advice is sensible but I would add that I think it unfortunate that HR professionals generally refer to formal performance management warnings etc. as 'disciplinary action'. The word 'discipline' implies serious fault and should, I think, be reserved for genuinely bad behaviour. Under-performing staff need to have their performance managed – if necessary to the point of dismissal - but they will often be in the wrong job for their skills and experience. I don't think that they should be 'disciplined'.

The Need for Full Records

The report noted that:

Patterns of behaviour are extremely important in tackling bullying. It is always right to consider whether the "perpetrator" was under acute pressure and just having a bad day, for example, and whether this was just an isolated outburst with no lasting effects and the behaviour was out of character, or whether such incidents had happened before.

It is therefore important for organisations to maintain reliable records and to log reported incidents and their outcomes accurately, and to have systems in place to enable patterns to be picked up and their historical and systemic significance understood.

ANNEX C

HR Professionals say that:

The best way to handle a performance management meeting - if you are summoned to one - is to ask for help. This will show that you want to improve, rather than just being defensive. You may even dodge a warning.

'I hear what you're saying' (spoken by an HR person) means one of two things.

- 'I agree with you but there is nothing I can do about it', or
- 'There's nothing I can do to make you feel better except listen'.

One of our most important jobs is to protect the organisation from lawsuits. So, even though things like sexual harassment training has been shown to have little value, we do it anyway because it reduces our liability.

If we ask you to travel for your job or attend a conference, it's not a question. Say 'no' very often and it can be career ending.

Those boring training things? We think they are boring, too.