

## Leading Agility: Summary of responses from the Public Leadership Inquiry Insights Panel, October 2010

### Headlines

“Localism and Big Society, plus reduced spend, mean that we will have to do things differently.”

“People will need to be enterprising to achieve objectives in tight times.”

“Agility is in the important/not urgent box and needs constant focus, or else it gives way to short-term pressures.”

As senior public and civil servants show confidence in their ability to lead their organisations through highly challenging times, they are determined to continue to raise the ‘agility’ of their people, their organisations and themselves. They recognise ‘agility’ as vital to their organisations’ future success and are keen to raise its prominence in the leadership and continuing transformation of public service organisations.

There are strong cultural and leadership catalysts for increased ‘agility’ but there are also powerful cultural and structural blockers. Fear is growing that perceived threats to the existing public service employee deal will serve to reinforce some of these blockers by encouraging a mindset characterised by self-preservation, risk aversion and silo mentality. As leaders gird their loins to overcome these dangers, they indicate that they will draw on three forces in particular:

- The power of the current ‘burning platform’ of significant cost reduction.
- The strength of their own example in leading ‘agility’ by providing active strategic leadership that encourages fast course adjustments in response to changing priorities; mobilising their people with the capability and confidence to move fast to new challenges; and developing the structures and platforms that support this increased flexibility (indeed, there is a strong plea to make faster progress in developing the

tools and processes that support more agile and flexible working).

- The innate commitment of public and civil servants to rise to the challenge of finding the best way to deliver public good.

These are the headlines from the Public Leadership Inquiry Panel Heartbeat Survey undertaken in mid October 2010, a week before the announcement of the Comprehensive Spending Review (‘CSR’).

The Public Leadership Inquiry Panel consists of some 20-25 senior civil and senior public servants from across Whitehall and more widely. Its purpose is to support inquiries into some aspect of the leadership challenge in the public sector and to gain a sense of what is happening/what is being experienced in lead Departments and Agencies. The intention is regularly to feed the data into the world of the senior civil and public servant, including our Open Inquiries. This Heartbeat Survey on Leading Agility was undertaken in support of our Open Inquiry on 19 October 2010. Panel members kindly completed a survey document. With all thanks to the Panel members, the findings of the Heartbeat Survey are presented against the following headings:

- Agility is vital to the future success of public service organisations.
- Agility will be even more important beyond the CSR.
- Agility has different levels of prominence across public sector organisations.
- There is strong tension between the catalysts and blockers of ‘agility’ in public service organisations.
- Leaders will need to play a pivotal role in encouraging their organisations to become more agile.
- Current pressures on the public service employee deal could strengthen the blockers in the way of increased ‘agility’.
- Despite all the challenges, senior public servants are confident in their ability beyond the CSR to deliver on the responsibilities that fall within their areas.



## 1. Agility is vital to the future success of public service organisations.

All respondents saw 'agility' as vital going forward. There were five main reasons for this:

- Accelerating social, political, technological and economic change.
- Increasingly fluctuating and high profile agendas, often pursued under significant media spotlights.
- The growing need to be ever more alert and responsive in pursuit of policy development and delivery.
- A changing delivery landscape (Big Society, localism).
- Significant cuts in public sector spending.

"Public sector spending reduced, fewer people in teams."

"We need to be ever more alert to spotting and seizing opportunities."

"We want to be on the front foot – anticipating the changes and putting in place a strategy now to ameliorate the impact of a huge reduction in our government funding."

"Our clients are going through a lot of change and we will have changes of our own. We also need to respond to our clients' changes. The next few years will be taxing."

It should be emphasised, however, that some respondents saw the need for 'agility' as being not quite so high in some particular areas of work in their organisations; for instance in areas involving legislation, which require a degree of deep expert knowledge and stable staffing.

## 2. Agility will be even more important beyond the CSR.

For similar reasons – with reduced resource being the 'burning platform' – respondents indicated that their organisations needed to be more agile after the CSR. "Less resource will necessitate new ways of working."

"People will need to be enterprising to achieve objectives in tight times."

"Reductions in the size of policy functions and, in particular, in the number of standing teams, will force flexible working."

"We will need to focus our resources on those activities likely to deliver the most."

"We will be smaller and we hope to lose some less agile people along the way."

"The challenge will be to make agility part of the cultural change we will need to make."

"Localism and Big Society, plus reduced spend, mean we will have to do things differently."

## 3. Agility has different levels of prominence across public sector organisations.

Although all respondents underlined the increasing importance of 'agility' for their organisations, they reported wide variety in the prominence that it was given. In some Departments and teams, it is given high profile (sometimes under the label of 'flexibility') and is reflected in core values. In other organisations, it is manifested in flexible policy or project pools. And in others, respondents report low profile for the concept.

"Our Departmental values and behaviours highlight quick response to new and changing priorities under 'innovation'. Agility is an essential in many jobs here."

"'Agility' is becoming more prominent in the context of the CSR, but it is still not fully embedded."

"Here, there is a tendency to look at it as a process rather than a value or leadership skill. The only real expression is a project pool of colleagues who can be employed to new priorities and projects."

## 4. There is strong tension between the catalysts and blockers of 'agility' in public service organisations.

As respondents consider the importance of, and prospects for, more prominence for 'agility' in their



organisations in the months and years beyond the 2010 CSR, they report the strengths of BOTH the catalysts AND blockers in their organisations.

In considering the main aspects and features of their organisations that serve to enable, support or CATALYSE 'agility', respondents pointed in particular to:

- The presence of a strong burning platform in the 2010 CSR.
- The increasing strength in some areas of cultural attributes that support 'agility' – creative thinking, empowerment, collaborative work style, an outward looking mindset.
- The sense that increasing numbers of colleagues are open to further change.
- The development of smarter, often web-enabled technologies to help spot opportunities and accelerate policy development and delivery.
- The success in some areas in adopting, over time, a leadership style and presence that consistently supports the strengthening of 'agility'; for instance, through recruiting flexible people and implementing regular workforce allocation.

“'Agility' is in the 'important/not urgent' box and needs constant focus, or else it gives way to short term pressures. We resist push back from clients.” Conversely, in considering the main aspects and features of their organisations that serve to slow down, resist or BLOCK 'agility', respondents pointed in particular to:

- “Bureaucratic and hierarchical culture and structures” that encourage excessive work in silos and obstruct clear, fast decision-making.
- Leadership that tends to reward deep expertise in specific areas rather than 'agility'.
- “Passive inertia” in some pockets – among staff who do not like to be moved out of their comfort zone, and middle managers who do not like to lose good staff.
- The disruptions of continual change, and in some cases the sheer scale of the change in front of people.

“Civil service culture that remains hierarchical and risk averse.”

“Poor information sharing, territorial behaviour.”  
“Silos and silo culture that hinders collaborative working.”

“Inability to set a clear direction from the top.”

“Although it is changing, I would say that some of our people remain stuck in old ways of doing things.”

“Current monolithic approach of Cabinet Office and our central finance/HR team to managing efficiency savings and cuts in a micro way.”

## **5. Leaders will need to play a pivotal role in encouraging their organisations to become more agile.**

Respondents underlined the importance of strong leadership in enhancing organisational 'agility'. They referred to the following ways in which they were personally leading 'agility':

- Active strategic leadership, regularly taking stock with colleagues of the current strategic position and the potential need to change course fast.
- Increasing insistence on 'agility' and flexibility in the capability expected of the leadership team and wider workforce.

“Everyone recruited to this area must be capable of performing a variety of roles – not just the role recruited to; all posts are advertised on the basis of 'this is a flexible role – your job may well change'.”

- Championing of flexible policy work, for instance by establishing and leading a flexible policy pool.
- Consistent advocacy of the need for 'agility' and flexibility in their day-to-day leadership of their people.
- Regular redeployment of their colleagues to new priorities, and a continued focus on learning and development, equipping them with new outlooks, experiences and skills.



- Intense, frequent two way communications.

## 6. Current pressures on the public service employee deal could strengthen the BLOCKERS in the way of increased 'agility'.

Respondents all emphasised the extent to which the employee deal was currently under pressure – from increased demands (more from less), accelerating organisational change, uncertainty about future rewards, and concerns that the work of public servants was becoming less valued.

This led to the fear that, at a time when public servants needed to be more agile/flexible/collaborative, these pressures might well encourage the opposite – self-preservation, risk aversion and silo focus. There is an important leadership challenge to ensure that some of the BLOCKERS of 'agility' are not strengthened by these concerns and worries.

“More will be expected from employees (spans will increase at all levels) at a time when the civil service is under siege – pay freeze, pension reduction, and work not valued.”

“The challenge will be to ensure that increased uncertainty around job roles/tenures/terms and conditions feeds through into a change of culture/approach rather than retrenchment into Departmental silos for those who survive.”

“Organisational change and 25% reduction at each level of SCS mean people are fighting for their jobs and not working collaboratively.”

“The flexible workers themselves have to be more accommodating.”

“The (growing) sense that their employers do not value them will shift attitudes away from a sense of corporacy towards individual self-preservation.”

## 7. Despite all the challenges, senior public servants are confident in their ability beyond the CSR to deliver on the responsibilities that fall within their areas.

We asked respondents to use the following scale to describe their levels of confidence in their ability beyond the CSR to deliver on the responsibilities that fall within their areas:

- A. Very confident that I will be able to deliver on the responsibilities that fall within my area.
- B. Fairly confident that I will be able to deliver on the responsibilities that fall within my area.
- C. Worried that I will not be able to deliver on the responsibilities that fall within my area.
- D. Serious concerns that I will not be able to deliver on the responsibilities that fall within my area.
- E. Certain that I will not be able to deliver on the responsibilities that fall within my area.

All respondents replied with B, with one or two saying 'with a touch of A' and one or two saying 'with a touch of C'.

This level of confidence flows from the sense that future, robust work plans have been shaped and agreed; that respondents have been preparing their people for an uncertain future, full of change; and that they have already learnt much about 'agility' and flexibility, and are keen to learn more. Their confidence is not quite at full throttle because of the potential threats to staff morale, the real resource constraints, the absence of robust systems and processes to support 'agility' and flexibility, and the uncertain external environment.

“We have a handle on the big asks for us but servicing the many players in the landscape and responding with agility to many brainwaves can mean that the sense of direction is not clear and Ministers don't make up their minds sufficiently ahead to avoid delays.”

“Within my team, I have had two and a half years to develop a more agile group and build up confidence and skills. My senior team and I have also emphasised and flagged up that the future will involve change and uncertainty, so people are prepared.”

“The tools to sustain this are not yet in place. We need to establish systems to allocate staff and stop things as



priorities change. We also need to do this on a Whitehall wide level, not just within Departments.”

“It is like playing chess without being able to see your opponent’s pieces. So you have to put faith in your individual and collective ability to find a way through the challenges, driven by a clear collective vision of how we can create a viable and successful future.”

*With all thanks to the Panel members for their time and contribution,  
Public Leadership Inquiry*

[www.publicleadershipinquiry.co.uk](http://www.publicleadershipinquiry.co.uk)

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**publicleadershipinquiry**

TURNING RESEARCH INTO ACTION

email · [info@publicleadershipinquiry.co.uk](mailto:info@publicleadershipinquiry.co.uk)

telephone · 01962 860 573

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