

Welcome to the Inquirer, a fortnightly Newsletter highlighting insights and new ideas about organisational leadership. In these lean challenging times, moments for reflection are at a premium. The Inquirer offers bulletins to support your agile leadership and your development of agile organisations. Please do feel free to share this open source Newsletter with colleagues and to join our continuing Public Leadership Inquiry and conversation with leaders on [www.publicleadershipinquiry.com](http://www.publicleadershipinquiry.com)

## Who authorizes your environment? Re-setting a new normal for public service leadership, by Robin Ryde

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### The Public Librarian's Dilemma

His legendary case of the librarian in a poor suburb of a US city delivers the sort of deeper questions that face all public service leaders today. The scenario is one where a librarian is understandably carrying out their duties as a custodian of the books and learning materials in their library when they begin to notice certain patterns in the activities of visitors to the library. One such pattern involves the arrival of young 'latchkey' children round about late afternoon when the school day finishes. They arrive, hang around for a while, perhaps remove a few books from the shelves to give the impression of using the library for its formal purpose and then when their parents finish work they are picked up and taken home. The library in this example temporarily becomes what is clearly a valuable childcare resource. This story reminded me of a friend of mine who also used to work as a librarian. She would encounter a similar pattern but this time with older homeless people who, as the weather got colder, would enter the library, grab the requisite book or two to show willing, and then take off their socks and dry them on the radiators. You can imagine the scene perhaps almost too vividly. And once they were warmed up and dried out they would be able to face the cold weather again. The library in this instance was offering temporary shelter for vulnerable people.

The dilemma of course is one about public value and leads us to ask the question, "what should the librarian do?". Imagine if you were the librarian; what would you do?



### Strategic Triangle

This focus on public value is one of three components to Mark Moore's Strategic Triangle. The Triangle has at one point this question of **public value**. On another point is the question of **means (or capabilities)**. This refers to the resources, capacity; capabilities etc. that enable an organisation or even a policy to deliver against the public value (the purpose) that is envisaged. The third point in the triangle is what Mark Moore calls the "**authorizing environment**" which refers to the people, groups and institutions that hold power to authorise the exercise of the means to deliver against the intended purpose/public value. The authorising environment might comprise politicians, business, citizens, the law, lobby groups and so on. When all three points are in alignment we are in business, but weaknesses in any of the three components or misalignment between them will seriously challenge the ability of the organisation or policy to deliver.

### UK Public Service Context and Challenges

In the UK public service at the moment there is an extraordinary set of circumstances that prompt us to reach for the insights and ideas displayed in Mark Moore's Strategic Triangle:

- A recession, the scale of which this country has not seen for decades
- A new, at times faltering, coalition government that is focussed on de-centralising power and driving resources into the hands of community, third sector and other "Big Society" entities
- A public service that is being rapidly and significantly reduced in size/cost (with departmental cuts ranging from 10-70%) alongside pay freezes and pension reductions
- A tough and at times highly critical attitude towards 'burdensome' and 'overpaid' public servants

And so if we take a look at public services through the lens of the Strategic Triangle we see what is quite a challenging, somewhat depressing picture:

- **Public Value/Purpose:** Civil Servants and Local Government public servants (for example) suddenly find themselves questioning what their purpose is in a system that seems to be exporting the responsibilities they once had out into, as yet fully ready, communities and away into industry.
- **Means/Capabilities:** The scale of cuts across the public service are so rapid and far-reaching that even if Civil Servants and Public Servants clearly understood their purpose (or the public value that they are now meant to provide), their ability to deliver is seriously compromised.
- **The Authorising Environment:** Not only does the mandate that government currently have feel somewhat shakey, but the level of backing for the public service from the media, citizens, lobby groups etc is at an all time low. Right now there would seem to be very few powerful supporters of public servants willing to 'authorise' much of what the public service might want to do. We only have to look to recent attempts to introduce bolder changes such as GP Commissioning or University tuition fees to see how the government has a deficit in its authority.



## Leadership Implications

The model offers some insights into why the path of public service leadership is currently so fraught: public service leaders are standing on distinctly shaky, unstable ground. But it also offers a guide for how public service leaders might try to navigate a way through this. Providing leaders can summon the energy and the will to step up to this challenge, what this suggests is that:

- Now is the time for public service leaders even more to look outward and engage much more actively with the authorising environment; to reach out into the political sphere, to work more closely with citizens, to build coalitions with lobby groups and the media so that their actions will find support and backing. If the diaries of senior leaders show that the greater majority of their time is focussed internally then this might be a sign that the balance is wrong.
- Now is the time for public service leaders even more to look across the system to see where other resources (now no longer in their departments) might lie. This inspires a collaborative frame of mind for public service leaders who might see opportunities to share resources with other leaders. But this is also about creative possibilities to work with the commercial sector, international partners, the voluntary sector and so on. One current world stage example is Anglo French collaboration in naval and military affairs. The Libya operation involves sharing of the French aircraft carrier and the pooling of different resources; there is also shared development resource. As the commanding French Admiral commented, "Gone are the traditional rivalries; we simply cannot afford them anymore."
- Now is the time for public service leaders even more to think really hard about the value they deliver. An excellent example of a smart and highly effective public service body that has taken the librarian's challenge and answered the public value question in a creative way is the Fire and Rescue Service. This is a service that has seized the opportunity to shift its value from 'cure' (putting out fires) to 'prevention' through widespread community engagement and education in areas of fire safety, smoke alarms, preventative measure. Fire deaths have reduced accordingly and call outs have dropped by some 50% in the last decade or so. But more than this, the fire and rescue service has used its strong brand reputation in communities to engage citizens, particularly young men, through boxing gyms, education centres and outreach activities; all of which have made a meaningful difference and delivered value in terms of community cohesion, well-being, health inequalities and so on.

The implications of the Strategic Triangle are ones that need to be picked up by leaders who now have some decisions to make about where they will direct their effort and how they will work differently in these austere but interesting times.



**PLi Comment:**

*The public service organisations that are weathering current adverse conditions the best are those where leadership effort is seriously driven outwards towards the authorising environment.*

*One of our clients in government has in a determined way connected tirelessly with industry and politicians and paid particular attention to its public face so that its contribution is better understood and valued. In the case of this particular client this has opened up and delivered additional resource opportunities. Another has turned with success to forming different commercial relationships with a range of partners in response to significantly reduced central government funding.*

*But the priorities do not end there. At PLi we would add two to the Strategic Triangle that relate to the need for leaders to look within to strengthen internal capabilities for what may be a long road ahead. Our encouragement to leaders in this context is to build strength in the areas of organisational resilience and agility – two pre-eminent leadership priorities in times like these. More details for those that are interested to be found under Free Resources.*

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**Public Leadership Inquiry is a bold research and consulting enterprise devoted to understanding and strengthening leadership and organisational change.**

**At the heart of our work is a focus on helping organisations to become AGILE and LEAN - two critical features of success for modern organisations. We look to the real-world experiences of leaders and undertake research that delivers insights, “know how” and the strategies needed to be agile and lean. We bring particular value to complex organisational challenges, in fact the more complex they are, they more we can help.**

**PLi was co-founded by Sue Duncan, former Government Chief Social Researcher; Robin Ryde, author & former CEO of the National School of Government; Steve Turner, executive coach and board level leadership advisor; and Julian Powe, employee engagement expert and board level change management advisor.**

