

Northern Leadership Academy PUBLIC SECTOR LEADERSHIP SUMMIT Leeds University Business School

Understanding Leadership with LogoVisual Thinking

This Public Sector Leadership Summit was a sequel to the event at Ripley Castle in 2007. Some of the fifty or so senior public sector managers attending this year, had been there then. The primary purpose of this event, that formed the opening part, was to share the findings of research done by the University in the meantime.

In essence this could be summarised as:

- Start from 'what is'
- Make the most of multiple perspectives
- Create feedback
- Inquire together (full report on NLA website)

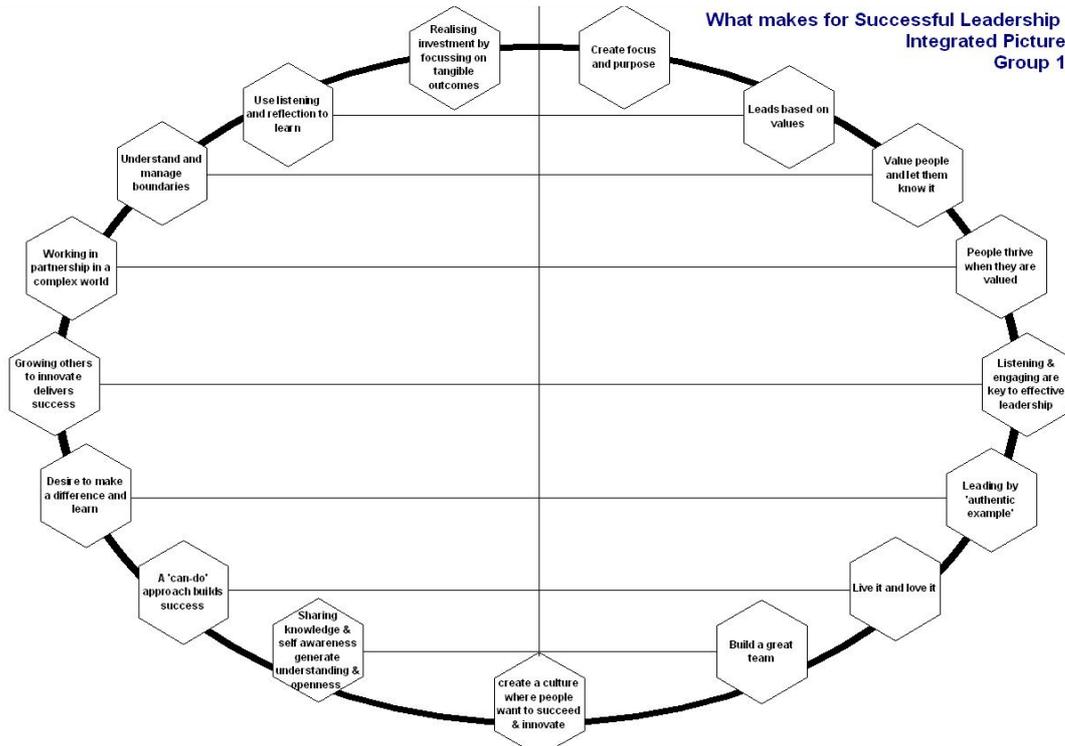
This was put into practice in the second part of the event with the introduction of LVT tools and processes. Working in nine sub-groups for a little over an hour, people generated their own responses to the question, ***“What makes for successful leadership in the public sector?”***

People noted their individual ideas on MagNotes and clustered them. Clusters were titled and groups then merged to cross present in three parallel sessions. In each, titles were distilled to a single picture and formed into a ring composition. In a plenary session, each group then 'told the story' of their composition.

The LVT process does not reject anything. Every single individual contribution has contributed to the outcome and each high-level concept can be traced back to the group that created it and to the individual contributions that gave it meaning. It should be stressed that the outputs arise from participants' shared experience and expertise derived from many years in public service. This is valuable work.

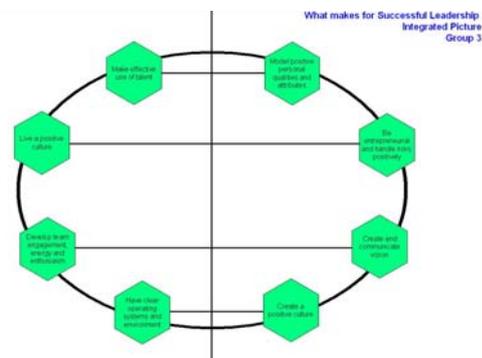
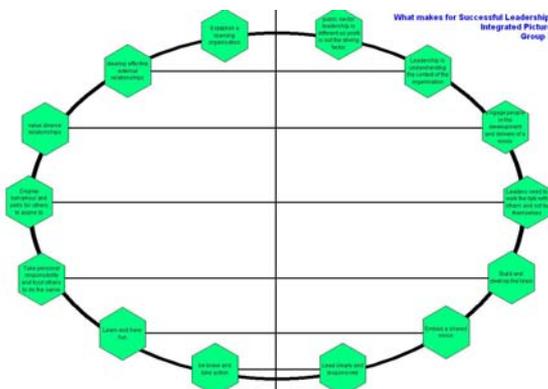
The ring is a sequence – a story, the telling of which strings the elements together as a whole. Reflecting on it, one begins to see something of the structure within. Stories have symmetry. There are correspondences between the two sides and tensions between opposites. If your story is coherent then your understanding becomes more holistic. It is no longer necessary to only work in linear sequence because, you inwardly connect across time – you invest the story with meaning, with being and your own intent – it lives in you and through you.

Here is the composition and story of one of the participant groups:



Leadership needs to create a sense of purpose with clear values. When they know they are valued, people thrive and their energies serve the cause. Listening engages people in leadership by authentic example. Because the message is being lived, team cohesion can grow into a culture of aspiration and innovation. Awareness, openness and understanding contribute to a can-do attitude. Within the organisation, people yearn to make a difference and to learn within a nexus of developmental relationships. Externally, the role of leadership is to develop partnerships and manage the boundaries. Reflection on and learning from results creates value, enabling investment to be realised by delivering tangible outcomes, bringing the purpose more clearly into focus . . It is a benevolent cycle. Success breeds success.

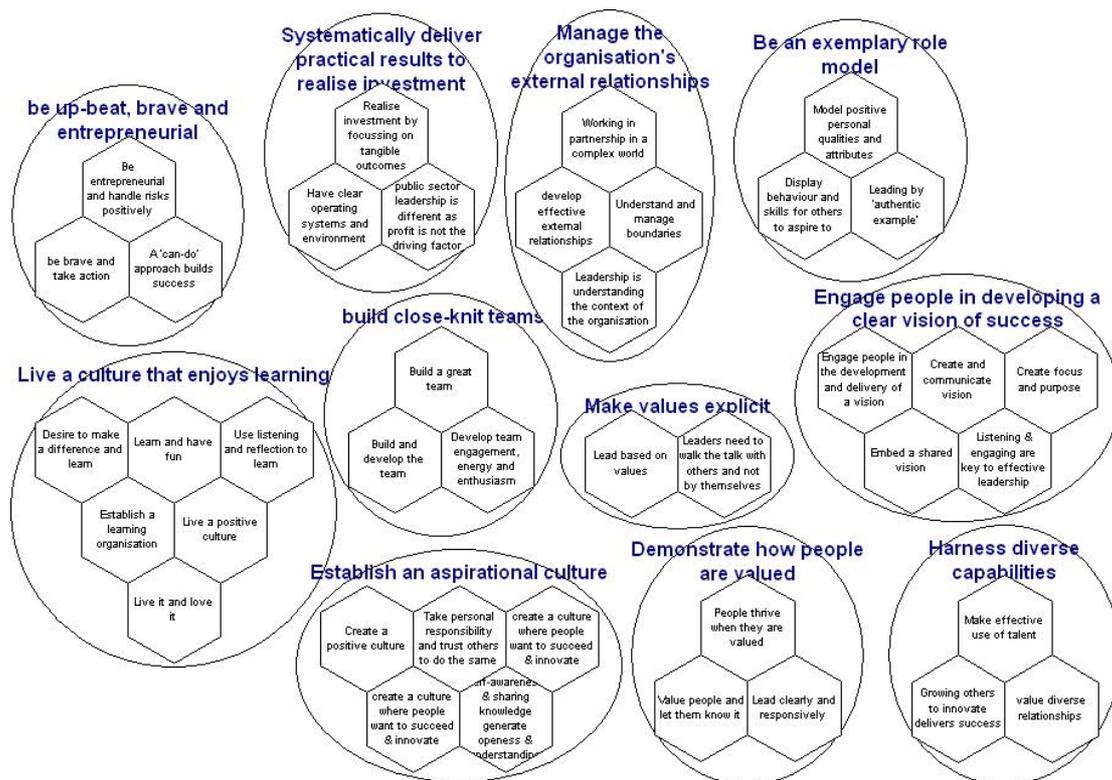
It was encouraging to hear this story being told by participants based on their own shared understanding, generated from multiple perspectives and many years of pooled experience.



The other two ring compositions made on the day

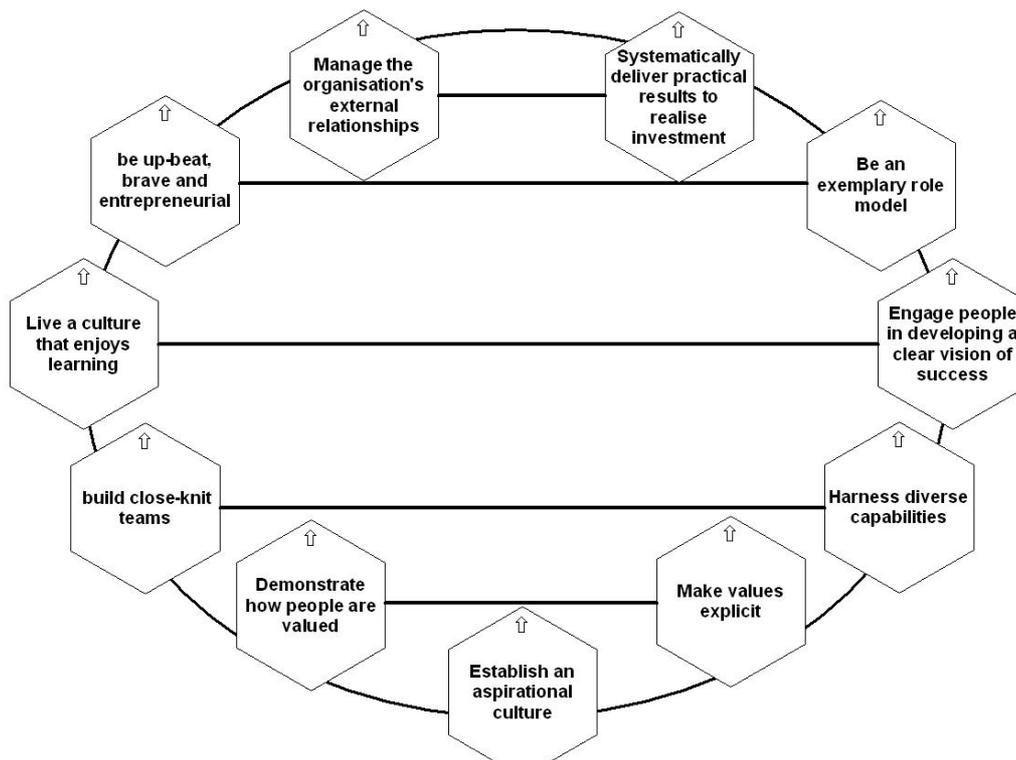
The summit session closed with a short Dialogue, with the three rings on display.

Had there been time and energy available and had it been necessary to come to conclusions, the LVT process could have usefully continued. We have subsequently taken the liberty of working with the material generated, so as to demonstrate where such a process might lead. The resulting output really is no substitute for the authentic product of the group, because much of the benefit derives from engaging in the thinking (emotional-cognitive) process and thus owning the output.



Combination of the contents of the three rings

We have taken from the three output rings the original thirty-nine items (themselves the titles of clusters created by different sub-groups), and clustered them in turn so as to reduce complexity and duplications. This has resulted in eleven combined items, which we have made into a ring that makes sense to us. This is not, we hasten to add, in any way the 'right' composition, as each group would arrive at a different outcome that makes sense to them collectively. We are all accustomed to expecting 'one right answer' but this would deny us differences of perspective that enrich our thinking. What matters is your inner connection with what makes sense for you.



Integrated ring composition based on the combination

Our version of the story of this ring composition, made using the material generated by those who took part (and you need to tell your own story for it to be useful) goes like this;

Our leadership (as that of everyone else and in every context) begins by acknowledging that our raison d'être is that there is a practical job to be done and that systematic outputs must be achieved. Such a context invites us to each adopt and begin to live a leadership role. As we do so, we engage those around us, connecting them to the whole and its purpose by 'seeing' the ideal outcome with shared intent. This brings people into relationship constructively so that their diversity of perspective, expertise and experience enriches what they are about. They become able to collaborate when their behaviour is moderated by clear, shared values.

So much for the linear version of the story.

Usually in a ring, maximum tension is experienced at the mid-point. In this case this can be expected in bringing about the emergence of an aspirational culture. The cynics will attack it. Apathy can defeat it. Trust can too readily be destroyed. Only by persistently modelling courageous entrepreneurial intent and consistent values-led behaviour will it be possible to change things.

Now let's look at the pairs across the ring.

External perceptions will mirror systematic outputs (or at least they cannot be seen to be successful without them). Being an exemplary role model will demand courage and entrepreneurialism. A learning culture will demand a vision of ideal performance (and conversely the ideal cannot be achieved unless people are willing to learn – we are not yet what we need to be to deliver what we aspire towards). In close-knit teams we merge our diverse abilities for the greater good. If our values are explicit we can demonstrate them in appreciation of one another.

When the dynamism of all these pairs is operating we will have an aspirational culture – but in the sequence of events we can expect that getting past midway will be a major challenge to everything we are attempting.

It is food for thought!

Out of this picture we can begin to see things we might do. More importantly, though, actually embracing the ideal we have described for ourselves changes who we are and what we stand for. Our beliefs and values evolve in the light of our designs. If we are not to condemn ourselves to repeating the patterns of our past we can choose to become the people who will live the future we desire.

This is the reason for engaging people in inventing their future in processes such as the one described here. We present ourselves a challenge – if we all choose to believe in that future, then nothing is likely to prevent it. In so choosing we become able to lead in that direction. When we move, Providence moves too. Leadership, after all, is 'a kind of magic' – and each and every one of us can be a magician!

John Varney March 2008