

## **Gaining the commitment necessary to reform public services**

Depressingly, the media is full of stories of politicians' plans to reform the public sector failing to gain the support of those running the services and all too often ending up in an embarrassing mess.

Targets in the police service cause Officers to chase inconsequential easily-detected crimes, new doctors' contracts in the NHS result in higher costs and less service, the introduction of high-profile computer systems ends up in protracted and costly wrangles, and local authorities continue to struggle in a morass of regulation and inefficient practice.

Research has consistently showed that projects to change or modernise services, whether in the public or private sector, fail to achieve their goals in over 70% of cases. So the problem is not new, but it does not seem to be improving either.

Some of the reasons were examined at a recent Lean Transformation workshop for public sector managers in Canary Wharf. Organisations that want to change successfully must become much better at re-defining the purpose of their enterprise and building affinity with their staff and customers. They must care more deeply about the ultimate benefits of their organisation and less about the multitude of targets and policies handed out by well meaning, but ultimately misguided, civil servants.

When leaders successfully pursue the creation of better outcomes in our communities, their change programmes can tap into everyone's desire to improve this work. This then creates a natural willingness to support and contribute. Without it, many changes proposed are doomed to be sidelined or subverted.

You would have thought there would be a compelling case for improving public services as they are overseen by elected members and paid for by the taxes of the very people that they seek to benefit. However, managers at the workshop raised a range of issues that were preventing them from making the progress they desperately wanted. The commitment of middle management was often cited as an impediment to change with too many actively or passively derailing the change process.

This is not surprising. Change often descends from a great height, backed up by arbitrary targets and unworkable policies. Some managers do attempt to sabotage reforms, but most are simply unaware about how new working practices are able to create much better results. They need to be convinced.

This failure of engagement and vision is one critical reason for the malaise that affects our public services. However, promoting awareness of the changes is not sufficient – change leaders must also foster an “*Affinity*” for a modernisation agenda and involve managers, front line staff and unions in its development. Only then will staff actively “*Buy in*” to the ideas and actively “*Commit*” to making them work – reflecting the “*ABC*” model for winning hearts and minds.

This ongoing commitment is critical as the changes must be fine-tuned and continuously improved long after any modernisation project has completed. The workshop explored how Lean Service is a systematic way of achieving this which creates much better outcomes for everyone - benefits to the enterprise, local communities, businesses and the environment simultaneously.

However, better engagement of staff is just the beginning. A systematic method for designing and delivering change is vital too. Hazel Cannon, Director of the Deming Forum, who also attended the workshop, agrees, “Organisations cannot announce grandiose aspirations or targets and expect employees to make a miracle happen. Leaders need to communicate an inspiring aim and provide people with a sound method to achieve it”.

Maybe if public sector managers used a more effective method when leading their people through the change process, we would see less resistance, faster progress, and ultimately create better places for all of us to live and work.