

Understand the Challenge and Lead Through it

It's at times like now that Public Services matters most and when good leaders rise to the fore.

It's obviously difficult to know how long we'll be in this very challenging period, which will likely fully stretch everyone in the public sector: you, your team, your boss, your Department, your Minister. And of course, our families.

The front line of the public sector is being overwhelmed (long queues outside Centrelink is a pretty confronting reminder), there's a scramble to hire and train more staff, and exhaustion is commonplace at the moment.

In these circumstances, many people won't be able to think clearly about what's coming to prepare for the phases ahead, it's all about survival at the moment. Most senior executives and their teams (across all jurisdictions) are under pressure and working long hours as daily Cabinet meetings become the new norm.

It's timely to remind ourselves that there's more going on, over and above our own work and that of our own Department or Agency. In the Commonwealth those at the centre, such as Prime Minister & Cabinet and The Treasury along with those involved in service delivery such as Health and Services Australia will be hardest hit.

Another less obvious example of a Commonwealth Department under the pump is the Attorney General's Department. The Attorney would need to be briefed and advised continuously on multiple legal areas such as National Security, but is also the minister of industrial relations when potentially millions may be out of work. Domestic and international legal advice would be required on several fronts to ensure Australia is acting with due regard to the rule of law.

In many respects the Public Sector in the States and Territories are under even more pressure, being that bit closer to the front line, especially in areas such as Education and Social Services.

What do good leaders do at a time like now?

Despite the fatigue good leaders will still find a way to walk the talk via their: optimism; resilience; agility; self-care and care for those they lead. In particular:

- They won't shy away from the challenge of leading during this uncertain period, nor will they create unnecessary panic or chaos even though they may feel it and see it in others.
- They will actively stay aligned with their bosses, whilst also provide meaningful direction for their teams.
- They won't abrogate decision making, despite the ambiguity that exists.

- They will actively support the work of their peers and minimize road blocks and silo's to ensure the important work gets done.
- They will be self-aware of their leadership 'shadow' and 'triggers' when tired and under pressure.
- They will find a way to consider and plan for what's coming over and above the immediate urgency, preparing for the future phases in the middle and second half of 2020.

Demonstrating 'care' for their team, their boss and their colleagues matters deeply. They'll know that some in their team will embrace the evolving environment with ease, whilst others will be anxious, overly cautious and veer away from any disruption. These good leaders will take the time to consider who needs a 'light touch' in terms of guidance and who might need more reassurance in these circumstances.

Providing meaningful direction about the work is one way to demonstrate care, especially for those feeling more unsettled. It's easy to fall into the trap of assuming everyone in your team know what the rapidly moving priorities are and their respective roles within them. At a time like now, more rather than less communication serves good leaders well. Working in a virtual environment, as many of us are starting to do, will make this even more important.

It goes without saying that all leaders are working hard at a time like this, but good leaders won't neglect time for their important relationships at home and their own health/well-being. There will be trade-offs during this initial urgent phase, but they know they'll only be able to sustain the ride and lead well at work if they are paying attention to these important parts of their life.

There will be positives that will emerge from this period, it's difficult to identify them just yet. What is clear though, is that this is a time to be super proud of what you do in the public sector. It's your hard work, commitment, expertise, leadership and influence that will support the government's ability to guide the Australian community through this.

Best wishes

Darren Stephenson, April 2020

About the author: Darren Stephenson spent 14 years working in the Commonwealth Public Sector, the majority of that time was designing and implementing leadership, culture and performance programs across several Departments. In 2008 he established Kirribilli Partners, a consultancy designed to support good leaders in the public sector lead well. He's also the architect of the highly regarded United Leadership Program, created to help leaders build and sustain high performing teams. In addition, Darren also facilitates several Executive Learning Groups with the Jeff Whalan Learning Group.