The role of the chief executive
The Role of the Chief Executive and the Management of County Councils

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It has become something of a cliché to talk about change, but the role of the chief executive and the management of County Councils are inextricably bound up with the management of change. What is more, this will not just continue, but looks certain to accelerate, some would say exponentially, in the future.

Change is all around us and can be unexpected and fast-moving. Few of us, for example, would have dared imagine possible the events of 1989 in Eastern Europe, nor the speed at which they have taken place. Closer to home, a host of issues present challenges for County Councils. The consequences of demographic change are currently causing growing concern. Economic development, social structures and processes and national and local policies are all undergoing change. In the last decade, some 50 new pieces of legislation affecting local authorities were introduced. Ministers have said that the legislative framework for local government is now in place and that they have no plans for further significant legislation here. That may be so, but much that is already on the statute book reserves powers for the extension or variation of the scope of current Acts by ministerial order.

Technological developments continue to outpace the ability of most people to comprehend what is currently possible, let alone future possibilities. In society at large, values attitudes and beliefs are all changing and look set to continue to do so. Environmental and health issues are looming large once again and present challenges for our lifestyles: the ‘greenhouse effect’; the
hole in the ozone layer; pollution from all sources; food safety scares; and AIDS, to name but a few.

The impact of ever more rapid transportation and communications has already made our world into a ‘global village’ for a growing proportion of the business community and, increasingly, for the public too. We also have to come to terms with the Single European Market, of great significance for local government as well as for the private sector. And, at the risk of sounding parochical, there is the imminent opening of the Channel Tunnel, though the impact of the physical link with mainland Europe will affect more than just Kent.

These are some of the most obvious issues of change that readily come to mind and the list is far from comprehensive. It is, however, sufficient to emphasise the point that the management of change is central to both the role of chief executives, in particular, and County Councils in general, because many of these changes require a strategic response which counties are singularly well equipped to provide.

The leadership role
What does this imply? The obvious response is the need for flexibility and adaptability. Yet change is often resisted, people have a tendency to fight to stay the same. Most people are inherently conservative with a small ‘c’. This suggests a number of closely related roles for chief executives, including practical leadership, vision, setting the style, changing the culture, strategic management, external relationships and helping members to handle the political ramifications of change. However, these roles merge and in practice are difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle.

If, on the one hand, change and uncertainty are here to stay and, on the other, people inherently resist change, then the need for leadership is paramount. If County Councils are to play a key role in the management of change they need a clear sense of direction and the capacity to ensure that their organisations are not only capable of but are actually delivering the goods.

Leadership is not the sole preserve of the chief executive, however. There is the need for an explicit partnership between political leadership and managerial leadership. Moreover, if leadership is to be effective the chief executive’s role as first amongst equals will not work. On matters which the chief executive judges to be of a corporate or strategic nature, he must have the authority to take the decision if necessary. This does not mean that he should interfere in service management. With the right team of chief officers there should be no difficulty on this point.

One aspect increasingly seen as a leadership role is that of spelling out the vision. This has at least two aspects. What are the issues for the future which
have to be addressed (some of which have already been mentioned), and what sort of organisations do we want our County Councils to be? First and foremost, public service has to be the number one priority. That, in the minds of the people we serve, is what we are here for. We shall need to be more innovative, opportunistic, and proactive in our outlook. We ought to want to see our County Councils as centres of managerial as well as professional excellence, as places which thrive on change and, in the minds of our employees, as ‘the place to be’. None of this automatically implies direct provision. Increasingly, we shall see greater use of contracting out, or at least testing the market. We should not be misled by the current patchiness of response on the part of the private sector. County Councils will have to become more business-like, whether they intend to retain as much activity as possible in-house or make increased use of external contractors. This will have major implications for the way we organise internal relationships, with ‘internal competition’, particularly in relation to support services, a factor of growing significance.

This leads on to another related aspect of leadership, setting the ‘style’ of the organisation. County Councils are often seen as slow, cumbersome and bureaucratic. This must change. How often do we respond to an issue by setting up a working party which eventually produces a report which, by then, is out of date and goes the way of so many earlier reports, gathering dust on the shelf? We have to get on with things and fine-tune later. To do this we need to allow people room to give of their best, not thwart them with rules and regulations at every step. This means giving people more responsibility, which in turn means increasing and clarifying their authority to act. They need control over the resources to do the job – people, money, physical resources and information which have traditionally been controlled by powerful central departments with little understanding of life at the sharp end. And we must encourage people to take risks, not slap them down the first time something doesn’t work out. The latter course of action would almost certainly guarantee that no one in the organisation would ever take another step forward. We must encourage our people to be outward looking – not inward – focused on the future, not hidebound with the here and now – or worse, the past – and to see their role as enabling not disabling, whatever role they play in the organisation.

This approach to management style has profound implications for the culture of County Councils. Culture is about the values, attitudes and beliefs which are crucial in determining the way County Councils actually perform and operate. There is no magic formula, an organisation’s culture is as distinctive as an individual’s personality. County Councils need to address the question of culture from where they are now, not try to copy some other organisation. There are, however, a number of issues which should feature in
any consideration of organisational culture. These include a preoccupation with quality, with encouraging openness and trust both within the organisation and in our relationships with customers and others that we deal with. If we are to become learning organisations that can change and adapt then we must also be listening organisations. There is a need to deal with cynicism and complacency by understanding, and then dealing with, the causes. And we should be promoting and encouraging energy, enthusiasm, flexibility, commitment and loyalty. There is already a lot of it about in County Councils, but we fail to recognise, value and harness it sufficiently.

The principles of management
If the people who work in County Councils are to make sense of all the changes, the vision, the style and the culture, they need a few reference points which can provide the answer in any situation. These are what one might call management principles and they represent the fundamentals of the County Council. There are three which are absolutely basic. Others could, no doubt, add to them, though if there are too many they will confuse rather than clarify.

The most important is getting close to the customer. This means more than just training our receptionists and telephonists. Everyone in the County Council has to be customer-aware. This means changing the focus of attention to the sharp end where the relationship with the customer takes place. It also means ‘inverting the pyramid’ and seeing the manager’s role as supporting and developing staff, not just telling them what to do or how to do it. We must also demonstrate that we are serious. Front-line staff are invariably the least paid, least well recruited, least trained and probably work in the worst conditions. They are also probably the last people to hear what is going on in the County Council. Moreover, we shall find increasing difficulty in recruiting them as demographic change works its way through. We need to reassess the role and value of the front-line.

Devolution is the second crucial principle. If staff are to be able to manage their part of the business, then we need to get the relationship between the centre and the services right. For too long the ‘stranglehold of the centre’ has, at the very least, served as a source of confusion and frustration. More significantly, it has clouded and undermined clear accountability. If there is no overriding reason for a function or activity to be controlled at the centre, then it should be devolved to the services and managers concerned. This does not mean that the centre has no role. It does, but it is a very different one from the traditional view. County Councils are still single, legal corporate entities and they need to decide those things which should be handled consistently throughout the organisation. These will provide a corporate framework to which all must adhere, but beyond which our services should be given freedom.
to innovate and operate. Moreover, the components of the corporate framework should be the absolute minimum necessary.

The role of the corporate departments is essentially strategic. It is about providing corporate direction, planning, monitoring and reviewing how the organisation is performing. The consequence of this is that many of the staff who have traditionally been employed in large central departments will need to move to Service Departments. The relationships with the central chief officer will be limited to the ‘Head of Profession’ concerned with professional and career development, and with the provision of information necessary for the corporate departments to perform their strategic role.

The emphasis on customers and devolution of accountability has major implications for how our people need to operate, and leads to the third principle. We need managers not traditional administrators. That is not to decry or undervalue the importance of sound administration, which has its place. ‘Management not administration’ is not an easy idea to put into practice. It means managers seeing themselves as accountable for the management and performance of their part of the organisation in the round. To do this, they must be given clear responsibility, they must control the key resources needed for the job, and they will need to take risks, though what this means in practice will need to be worked through in each service.

If progress is to be made in making these management principles stick, then four key issues have to be addressed. The first is gaining and maintaining political commitment to the philosophy and approach, and that is very much a chief executive role. The second is tackling the issue of internal communications. This can be difficult in County Councils by virtue of their size and geographic dispersion, but it is not impossible. It is, however, vital. Otherwise, the principal means of communicating management messages will be either via the ‘grapevine’ or the trade unions, and that is not their role. The third issue is training and development. To transform people into managers requires time, effort and resources, in order to equip them with the appropriate skills. But training courses, whilst necessary, are not sufficient. There is a need to develop people on the job. This means coaching and appraising which involves providing feedback, recognition, and support. Fourth is the question of information systems. Without the necessary management and financial information and the capability to work with it, managers will not be able to manage effectively. It must be appropriate, intelligible, accurate, and timely.

If handled well, political commitment, communications, training and development and information systems will not just facilitate effective management, they will give it a substantial boost. If handled badly, they will frustrate, confuse and demotivate.
Towards strategic management
All of this implies some framework in which to manage the County Council. In Kent we use the term strategic management. We have looked at various private sector approaches to strategic management. Whilst they help in the thinking, their practical application is limited. The reason is simple. In the private sector, the bottom line is performance measured in terms of profit achieved. In County Councils, performance is measured against political values and priorities achieved. Consequently, we are working to a simple concept of strategic management, balancing the ‘performance requirement’ against ‘operational capability’. It is the chief executive’s job to ensure that these are in balance, although I prefer the concept of ‘dynamic equilibrium’, whereby improvements on one side of the equation lead to a matching response on the other.

The performance requirement is derived from a number of sources, external pressures, customer needs, and comparisons with other County Councils, allied to political and managerial vision. It is traditionally somewhat better managed than operational capability. There are four or five supporting activities. The first is what might be termed ‘futures thinking’, which is vital if County Councils are successfully to fulfil the strategic role to which they are so well suited. This means raising our sights from the here and now and thinking not just about the medium term but the long term and the very long term.

Research and information has a key role in this process but is not always as well focused or co-ordinated as it might be. Policy analysis is important in helping to clarify what the performance requirement is, or should be. At its simplest, it involves asking naive questions (why, what, when, where, who, how?) about everything we do from a policy perspective. This, by definition, cannot just be an officer exercise. It is a crucial area for members. And, finally, there is a need for a system of medium-term planning and budgeting, which draws out and supports members’ priorities. But the process should be policy-led not resource-dominated, and must address the political values and priorities, not just the professional concerns.

Operational capability encompasses questions about culture and style together with managerial issues about directional clarity and managerial ‘grip’. It also requires a consideration of structural factors about the suitability of the design of the organisation, effective operating systems and processes, and finally the question of resource management in all its aspects. Some of these have already been covered, while others require further comment.

The notion of business plans is one that is beginning to develop. Each service delivery unit, be it service based or providing internal services, should have a business plan. This should set out the aims, objectives and priorities,
together with specific actions, timescale and targets. The accountable officer should be clearly identified, together with measures by which performance will be judged. The plan should also identify resource implications and constraints to be overcome. This leads on to the whole question of performance management. All County Councils have some form of performance review function, but this alone is not sufficient, and tends to look back rather than forward. It needs to be complemented by business plans supported by performance appraisal and performance-related pay to give the whole process some bite. But this is still not enough. It is still too internally focused and means of assessing effectiveness need to be developed. These are likely to include output performance indicators, market research and methods of regular consumer monitoring, not just on satisfaction with current services but with future service development.

From business planning and a vigorous approach to performance management, indications may appear that organisational structure is a problem. Often this will require only fine-tuning, but from time to time the need for more fundamental reorganisation will become evident. These have to be faced and need to be based in part on radical thinking about the real purpose of the service and in part on a rigorous business analysis. Two other features are vital: active involvement of members and the staff concerned, and speed in carrying out the change. A prolonged process will not only demotivate, the best people are likely to vote with their feet.

Operational capability determines, and is itself determined by, the styles and methods of service delivery. Again, the active involvement of consumers and questioning by ‘outsiders’ to the service have a vital role to play in ensuring that service delivery is truly meeting the needs and expectations of the customers.

Another key role for County Council chief executives lies in developing relationships with other organisations. The networking and ambassadorial role is one that is generally well developed in County Councils and is mentioned here only for the sake of completeness. The amount of time spent on this role is considerable and therefore needs to be focused on current or potential issues in particular. There are also less tangible benefits to be gained in terms of the image of the County Council and the esteem in which it is held.

**The political environment**

Finally, there is the question of helping members to handle the political ramifications of managing change. They may well be interested in some or all of the issues discussed already. Ultimately, though, their concerns will be with achieving political values and priorities both in terms of service delivery and responding to more general issues which affect the county or their
constituency. This, I suspect, is many times more difficult in counties which do not have clear overall control and I have very real admiration for chief executives and politicians who manage to achieve change effectively where the County Council is ‘hung’ or ‘balanced’.

The first task is to get, or help, members to articulate their values and priorities. This may involve challenging them in order to clarify these values, and this is obviously easier to achieve when there is a spirit of mutual trust, respect and partnership between members and officers. It also means recognising that true discussion of policy cannot easily take place in the public forum. Effective policy discussion involves generating ideas across the whole range of possibilities before evaluating them. The chief executive has to recognise that this debate will happen anyway and it is his or her job to ensure that he is contributing to, and informing, that debate wherever it is happening.

For the chief executive to be truly effective, there is a need to develop a spirit of political and managerial partnership and mutual understanding. In County Councils there has been a tendency for chief officers to monopolise the political interface. Where this happens it leads to a lack of political awareness and sensitivity amongst managers, often at a quite senior level. Part of the chief executive’s role is to develop political sensitivity in the officer structure, perhaps through specific training, but more importantly through political exposure. This means developing confidence with both the members and the chief officers in this process.

The chief executive also has to recognise that members have different sets of interests. Some are not particularly interested in strategy and policy, they are more concerned with service issues or with particular sets of needs, whether geographically or socially defined. The role of members is changing in local government and the chief executive needs to ensure that the backbenchers’ role is not overlooked. Part of this comes down again to the question of communication. If members do not understand what is going on they cannot be expected to provide support.

There are various ways in which the right climate can be developed. Some which have proved effective include joint seminars, briefings on specific issues, the use of special groups for particular issues, joint member-officer working groups and departmental ‘open days’ to explain the work of a service and provide opportunities for members and officers to meet informally. There are many others, but the key point for chief executives is knowing what will or will not work in their particular County Council.

**The key role of the chief executive**

To conclude and summarise, the role of the chief executive in County Councils is all about managing change. This requires leadership on the officer side in
partnership with the political leadership. It involves spelling out the vision, setting the style, changing the culture and establishing the key management principles. County Councils must be increasingly preoccupied with their customers and need radically to alter the relationships between corporate and service departments with a drive to devolve to the latter. We must develop well rounded managers and ensure that the activities to support the process of change are fully effective.

The chief executive must also take responsibility for strategic management, ensuring that political and managerial expectations are matched by the organisation’s capability to deliver. The chief executive also has a key role to play in developing effective external relationships, particularly in respect of strategic concerns. Ultimately, however, the chief executive’s role is to provide the interface between the political and executive arms of the County Council. The key to success here lies in promoting and developing a spirit of genuine and effective partnership between officers and members. In the end, that will be the key to managing change effectively.