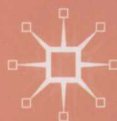


# Managing in a Political World

The Life Cycle of Local Authority  
Chief Executives

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Steve Leach



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First published 2010 by  
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN: 978-0-230-24562-4 hardback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Leach, Steve, 1942–

Managing in a political world : the life cycle of local authority  
chief executives / by Steve Leach.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-230-24562-4

1. Local government—Great Britain. 2. Government executives—  
Great Britain. 3. Chief executive officers—Great Britain. I. Title.  
JS3158.L43 2010

352.23'2140941—dc22

2010027531

10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
19	18	17	16	15	14	13	12	11	10

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

## Managing in a Political World

*Also by Steve Leach*

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THE CHANGING POLITICS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT (*with John Gyford and Chris Game*)

THE CHANGING POLITICS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN BRITAIN

# Preface

This book is the outcome of a long-term interest in the relationships between leading members and officers (and in particular between political leaders and chief executives) in British local authorities. As a (very) junior planning officer in Manchester City Council in the late 1960s, I noted with interest the way in which the City Planning Officer reacted angrily to the characterisation of planning by the leaders of the new Conservative administration as 'nugatory' (without myself being wholly clear what the word meant!) and the way he subsequently sought political allies who would challenge this perception. When I moved to Cheshire CC in the early 1970s, I soon became aware of the different political climate to that of Manchester and the (almost) total domination of Sir John Boynton, the county clerk (as he was then titled) over the political leadership. In the mid-1980s, when based at the Institute of Local Government Studies at the University of Birmingham, I was a member of a research team which carried out a major piece of research into the political organisation of local authorities for the Widdicombe Committee, which involved *inter alia*, interviews with leaders and chief executives in 103 different local authorities. The mid-1980s was the heyday of the so-called 'loony left' of the Labour party at the local level. Ken Livingstone, Derek Hatton, David Blunkett, Bernie Grant and Graham Stringer were all local leaders characterised (arguably unfairly) by this term, and it was the resistance of the authorities which they led that motivated the Conservative government to set up the Widdicombe Committee. It was a vulnerable time for chief executives, a time when the propensity of 'political logic' and 'managerial logic' to pull in different directions (see Chapter 1) became all too apparent. It has never been easy for ruling parties to dismiss chief executives, but increasingly ways were found of 'easing them out'.

In the late 1990s I carried out research into member-officer relations for the then Local Government Management Board with colleagues at De Montfort University, which produced a further set of insights into the topic. Directors of Social Services were particularly

vulnerable at the time, partly because of the propensity of their departments to generate 'bad news' stories. It was also becoming apparent that the increasing number of hung authorities was providing opportunities for 'managerial logic' to dominate, particularly in situations where two of the parties concerned failed to establish a stable joint administration.

The Widdicombe research evidence made it clear that although councils were not required to designate an individual councillor as 'council leader', by 1985 most of them (small rural independent-dominated councils apart) did so. The position of council leader developed in significance in the 1990s and with it the status of the chief executive, whose role began to transcend the familiar traditional 'primus inter pares' label. The election of a Labour government in 1997 and its introduction (in the Local Government Act 2000) of formal local executive government (including the possibility of elected mayors) reinforced this trend. Although officer – member relations has remained an area of interest in its own right, the council leader/chief executive relationship has increased in significance both as a focus of council decision-making and as an area of academic interest. The content of the book I wrote with David Wilson on political leadership<sup>1</sup> reflected these developments. Although the focus was on council leaders, the interviews carried out with them invariably illustrated the growing importance of the leader/chief executive relationship. There were still some ineffective council leaders, who operated as mouthpieces of group opinion and low-profile chief executives who allowed (or were unable to prevent) a high level of autonomy amongst service directors, but they were both increasingly few and far between.

By the time of the next piece of research in which I was involved – a Joseph Rowntree Foundation study of political leadership in England and Wales<sup>2</sup> published in 2005 – the role and status of council leaders and chief executives had been further strengthened by the government's belief in the value of individual leadership, in both spheres, which was expressed in a series of White Papers and other official documents from 2001 onwards and was subsequently reflected in several of the provisions of the Local Government Act 2007 (see Chapter 11). As we shall see, there is little evidential basis for believing that strong individual leadership results in better performance (however measured) than do other more collective styles of leadership. But the

re-iteration of the government's belief that it does, coupled with the perspective adopted by the Audit Commission in their corporate assessments of council performance between 2002 and 2008, certainly put pressure on councils to reflect this viewpoint (not least in the carefully rehearsed presentations made to Audit Commission teams during their CPA visits).

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation research carried out in the 2003–2004 period involved in-depth interviews with council leaders and chief executives in nine case-study authorities (three of which had elected mayors) supplemented by similar interviews in seven additional authorities (two of them mayoral). Although the main focus of the research was on political leadership, the detailed notes of the chief executives interviews provided a range of valuable insights into the changing priorities of the chief executive role in the mid-2000s, in particular the impact of the introduction of local executive government, the Audit Commission inspection regime and the ever-increasing emphasis on partnership working.

These notes were a resource I decided I would like to augment and exploit further. In 2007 I successfully applied for a small grant from the Leicester Business School 'seedcorn' research fund, which enabled me to carry out a further 16 interviews with chief executives. It is this material, together with 14 of the interviews with chief executives carried out in connection with the Joseph Rowntree research, which forms the basis for the analysis in this book, although I have also drawn where relevant, on the sequence of earlier research projects outlined above.

The 30 interviewees were not selected at random. The nine case-study authorities in the Joseph Rowntree Foundation research were selected to provide a mix of mayoral authorities (3) and authorities who had adopted the leader and cabinet model (5) plus one 4th option authority. We also ensured that we had a reasonable mix of authority type and political control. The supplementary interviews were carried out in authorities where I have previous contact with the chief executive, and was confident that they would talk frankly to me about their experiences (which indeed they did). Similarly the selection of the 16 chief executives in 2007 was made on the basis of previous knowledge (or in one or two cases, opportunism) for similar reasons. I wanted to avoid situations where interviews might come to be dominated by PR-tinged, 'this is what we have achieved in this



authority', types of input, and (with one or two minor exceptions) I am confident that I succeeded in this aim.

In the 2007 interviews I chose not to interview the leaders with whom the chief executives were currently working. I was aware that in the majority of cases, the chief executive concerned had previously held a similar position in one or more other authorities, and I was particularly interested (*inter alia*) in their comparisons between experiences in their different authorities (and/or where relevant, with different leaders in their current authority). Also I knew I wanted to write a book about the particular experience and perspective of chief executives and, in these circumstances, felt that it was less important to interview leaders also.<sup>3</sup> However, where I felt it was necessary to check out a situation described by a chief executive – particularly in a relationship which had become problematical – I sought informally to do so.

It could be argued that the account I develop in this book about the immersion of chief executives in a political world, and the way they deal with it, is one-sided. Indeed, in Chapter 1, I draw an important distinction between 'political logic' and 'managerial logic' and use it to demonstrate that what makes sense from a political perspective may not do so from a managerial perspective, and vice versa. Thus when in interviews chief executives identified and exemplified 'inappropriate' behaviour on the part of the leader they worked with, such behaviour often (although not always) could be seen as 'appropriate' from the point of view of the leader. A leader who opens a meeting of a Local Strategic Partnership by declaring that the requirement to work in partnership is for him an unwelcome dilution of local democracy and accountability may be sending important signals to his or her party colleagues (as well as no doubt believing it). However, his statement is almost certain to be seen as unhelpful and inappropriate from the managerial perspective of a chief executive, seeking to build bridges with partners.

Indeed, in other places (Leach and Wilson (2000), Gyford, Leach and Game (1989)) I have argued that it is extremely healthy for political leaders to question and challenge the advice they receive from officers (including the chief executive) and to feel free not to take it. Consider some examples; 'leader, there's a wonderful opportunity to solve our housing problem by building high rise flats, and, do you know, the higher we go, the more subsidy we get from the government' or 'leader, I know a lot of residents will be displaced

by the Housing Action Area, but we do want a social mix in our inner city areas don't we?' In any major policy dispute between leader and chief executive, my inclination would usually be to side with the former. After all, leaders have a democratic mandate which chief executives lack.

However, this book does not aim to take a balanced view. It is an attempt to understand things from the perspective of chief executives, drawing on in-depth interviews I carried out with 30 of these vulnerable and committed individuals. I do from time to time point out that the managerial viewpoint of a chief executive, quoted in the text, would not necessarily be shared by the political leader involved for legitimate political reasons, to ensure that the reader recognises the need to interpret chief executive perceptions in a wider (political) context. But otherwise I make no apologies for a book which tells the story of operating in a political environment from a chief executives perspective. Anyone seeking a balancing perspective from political leaders can find it elsewhere (Leach and Wilson (2000), Elcock (2001), Leach, Hartley et al. (2005)).

It is worth noting, at this juncture, why in Chapter 1 the literature on leadership has not been given greater prominence. After all, both council leaders and chief executives are indeed 'leaders' in a positional sense, and (in most cases) they exhibit at least some of the qualities typically associated with effective leadership (e.g. decisiveness, responsiveness, charisma, networking capacity etc.). My response is that a review of the vast literature on leadership and the attempt to apply it to the roles and relationships of chief executives would have taken up more space than would have been merited by the 'added value' involved. The crucial aspect of leadership which was highlighted time after time in the insights provided by the chief executives interviewed is one which was used by Leach and Wilson in their book on political leadership (where my views on leadership theory can be reviewed by those interested).

By leadership behaviour we refer predominantly to explicit actions taken to persuade others... to follow particular lines of action that they would not necessarily be disposed to follow... the essence of leadership is the ability to inspire or persuade others to follow a course of action where there is at least some initial resistance to following it.

(Leach and Wilson 2000, p. 11)

Whatever else leadership involves, it certainly involves the above quality. Leading followers or colleagues who agree with you does not seem to me to require any particular skill. Discovering what the majority of your colleagues think is the right thing to do, and then adopting that as your position is in effect an abdication of leadership. This book focuses (inter alia) on the skills and tactics which are helpful (from a chief executive's perspective) in persuading a leader of the appropriateness of a particular course of action (on the need for a particular change) when the leader is initially unconvinced, or even opposed.

There is much material in this book which will be helpful to new or aspiring chief executives in strengthening their leadership capacity, especially the section of good advice (drawn from the insights of the chief executives interviewed at the end of the book). What is not on offer is yet another book which deals explicitly with leadership theory and leadership skills. There are plenty of those already available!

In the hope of extending the appeal of this book to a wider audience, I have sought to avoid presenting it as an academic treatise. I have used theoretical concepts selectively where I think they will help the reader understand the implications of the empirical material, but there is no comprehensive 'review of the literature' and no attempt to rigorously apply a particular theoretical framework to my findings. Hopefully academic colleagues will accept these limitations and recognise that I wished on this occasion to write a book with a wider appeal.

Of the total of 30 chief executives interviewed, 20 were men and 10 were women. At the time of the interview, six worked in mayoral authorities, 22 in 'leader plus cabinet' authorities and two in 4th option authorities (with 'streamlined committee systems'). Of the authorities concerned seven were shire counties, seven shire districts, three London Boroughs, eight metropolitan boroughs and five unitary authorities. Eight of the councils had a Labour majority, seven a Conservative majority, four a Liberal Democrat majority, ten were hung, and one was dominated by independents. Thus despite the (deliberate) decision not to pursue a random sample, there is clearly a reasonably representative cross-section of authority types and forms of political control in the 30 authorities concerned.

To try to ensure as frank an expression of views from chief executives as possible, I made two commitments. The first was to guarantee anonymity. I am confident that it is not possible to identify any of the chief executives I interviewed within the text of the book (although no doubt some readers will want to hazard guesses). Secondly I decided not to tape record the interviews. Although most of my respondents would have been agreeable to my doing so, my experience in the past is that the presence of a tape recorder does sometimes (not always) have an inhibiting effect, particularly when respondents wish to identify and comment on problematic or dysfunctional behaviour on the part of leaders. As a result, although I have included a large amount of material from the interviews, they are not verbatim quotes. I am confident, however, that my note taking (and retentive memory) means that the words I have used and ascribed to the interviewees concerned represent an accurate sense of the experiences they were describing or points they were making. However, to acknowledge the fact that they are not verbatim quotes, I have distinguished them in the text from the quotes which are verbatim.

The interviews were semi-structured in nature, that is to say there was a list of headings (including one or two specific questions) which I wished to discuss with all the chief executives interviewees. Because the main aim was to encourage chief executives to talk freely about their experiences, the order in which the topics were raised was subject to variation, with a tendency on my part to follow up issues as they emerged from the conversation. I also often responded to points made by interviewees, comparing or contrasting what they said with responses from other chief executives. This may seem to some an unusual way to conduct an interview – indeed the interview often developed into a conversation/discussion – but the device certainly proved helpful in drawing out further justifications (or reservations) from interviewees as to why they had taken a particular stance.

The main focus of the interviews was on the capacity of chief executives to manage within a political environment; hence the emphasis on the relationship with the leader in particular, but also worth key opposition figures. There are of course other important aspects of a chief executive's work – his or her relationship with members of the management team, for example, and the challenge (in many cases) of changing an authority's culture to improve its performance. These

'other aspects' were discussed only in situations where the ability of chief executives to achieve what they wished to achieve had been hampered (or facilitated) by political involvement. For example, a chief executive may see the need for key changes in personnel in the management team which the political leadership may resist. Or attempts to dispel a 'blame culture' may be frustrated by the fact that leading members continue to publicly allocate blame. Such situations are of relevance to this book, but not those which lack any kind of political input (e.g. a 'middle manager' training and development scheme aimed at enhancing organisational capacity or an attempt to rebrand the local authority's image). The book is about the particular challenges facing chief executives in managing in a political environment, not a comprehensive assessment of the overall scope of the job.

My hope is that the book will appeal to two audiences. First academics with an interest in local politics, the strategic management of local authorities and the relationship between political and managerial leaders should find it of interest. As noted, I have not attempted to interpret my findings within any ambitious kind of theoretical framework. However, I have drawn eclectically on various conceptual frameworks which I have found helpful in previous related work, including new institutionalism, leadership task analysis, 'negotiated order' and the use of 'critical incidents'. These approaches are drawn together – albeit relatively loosely – in Chapter 1.

The second target audience is local authority chief executives themselves, and aspirant chief executives. Because the book is based primarily on the practical experience of chief executives in a range of different situations, it contains a good deal of potentially helpful guidance to those who might find themselves in similar situations – for example, 'if you are faced (as I was) with this particular dilemma, here is a way of resolving it'. The book concludes with an extended section of good advice or guidance for chief executives, drawn wholly from the insights and experiences of those interviewed.

Recently (March 2010) chief executives have been in the news, in particular as a result of an Audit Commission report which revealed the size of the pay-offs some of them have recently negotiated when the political leadership had decided they no longer wished to work with them. There has also been increasing speculation about whether

the chief executive post, as currently defined, is compatible with the concept of strong political leadership (particularly elected mayors). These topical issues, which are discussed in Chapter 12 may even extend the appeal of the book more widely.

The structure of the book is as follows. Chapter 1 is the conceptual chapter where I set out and discuss the ideas I have found to be helpful in making sense of context in which chief executives operate and the nature of the challenges facing them. I then consider three crucial early stages in a chief executive's experience in a particular authority – deciding whether to apply for a particular job; if offered it, whether or not to accept it; and how to make best advantage of the 'period of grace' or 'honeymoon period' which chief executives almost always experience in the first 6–9 months of a new appointment. There follow three chapters about key aspects of a chief executive's job – the role as head of paid service (in which political leaders are not expected to interfere – but sometimes do); their approach to the absolutely central relationship with the council leader; and the challenge of dealing with political change – particularly a change of administration, but also a change of leader within the same administration. Attention is then focused on the chief executive as a political animal, reflecting the fact that chief executives necessarily become immersed in the world of politics, but the way they deal with this immersion varies considerably, in particular with regard to the 'bottom lines' and 'no go areas' they seek to identify. The essence of a good relationship between a chief executive and political leader is then examined, emphasising the importance of negotiation, whilst critically examining the traditional (but simplistic) view that 'all you need is trust'. In the following chapter, a series of 'critical incidents' which have in one way or another tested the chief executive/leader relationship are elaborated, classified and interpreted. The circumstances in which chief executives have to consider whether they wish to stay in post or seek a job elsewhere are then considered. Two important government initiatives which have profoundly influenced the role of the chief executive and the relationship with political leaders (all party groups) are next discussed; the impact of inspection and the performance culture, and the move to executive government (including the 'special case' of elected mayors). Different future developments in the role of chief executives are then discussed in the light of the research evidence and the changing agenda facing local authorities. Finally a

section of 'good advice' distilled from the experiences of the chief executives interviewed is set out.

I would like to express my gratitude to those who were prepared to read through and comment on an earlier draft of this book, in particular Colin Copus, Mark Roberts, Melvin Wingfield and Chris Game. I also acknowledge the influence of a range of other academics who share my interest in the topic covered by this book, and have influenced my thinking about it, notably Vivien Lowndes, David Wilson, Lawrence Pratchett, John Stewart and George Jones. Aileen Kowal has (yet again) coped wonderfully well with the scrawled handwritten versions of my chapters, transforming them into coherence and readability. I am grateful to the Leicester Business School for the seedcorn grant which enabled me to carry out the 16 most recent chief executive interviews, and to the many chief executives who have been prepared to share their thoughts and experiences with me. Finally, thanks again to Karen, Callum and Fergus for providing me with the kind of supportive family environment which makes writing a book like this so much more manageable.

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