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Stepping up to levelling up

As leaders put together their teams to tackle the challenges of levelling up, **Prof Tony Wall, Christine McDonald** and **Rachel Robins** offer some tips for getting it right

Leaders across England are establishing new teams to tackle the major challenge and opportunities created by the levelling up agenda. These teams are often multi-professional teams, crossing service and technical areas and drawing from different specialist and technical expertise. Making these teams work needs effort and clear structures and goals.

We are already seeing how leaders are pushing forward despite the background noise of criticism about who was awarded what money, how much they should have received and who was not awarded any money – all of this is set against a backdrop of preparing for the disruption of strikes.

Establishing high performing teams takes enormous change work in the least challenging times but, looking at all of today's issues, we are hearing about the pressure to get it right. Eyes, political and lay, are on these projects because they are big, highly visible and there is a lot at stake for communities and political leaders.

In our experience, it is critical that leaders have some key principles in mind as they establish the teams (or when they delegate to other senior leaders in their teams).

Here are some points to think about:

1. Refocus on the outcomes to create a sense of purpose
Outcomes are ultimately why a project has been created, so it is important to clarify these as soon as the team is established (often it will be part of a recruitment screening or selection process). If there is any ambiguity about a levelling up project, clarify it as soon as practically

possible. Outcomes will be a guiding star throughout a levelling up project.

2. Clarify the pathway to those outcomes with urgency

Outcomes are only part of the story – the pathway is essential and should be clear to all stakeholders; it is the road map to achieving large scale change. This means having visuals to communicate the key threads to a project to all involved. It also provides a platform to review whether the pathway is itself working (ie whether the 'theory of change', which may be used in evaluation, is effective).

3. Create time and space for the team to form

This includes – but is beyond – the formal structures of meetings and includes the informal spaces for teams to get to know each other. Overly long meeting agendas should not zap the energy and creativity of the team; governance can be done in digital spaces in many ways. We have found in our own work that leaders want to use time together for creativity and innovation, with a general preference for less committees.

4. Value a climate of voice so sharing news is both relevant and timely

Recognise and show your appreciation of sharing voice and openness – maybe the mechanics of which can be determined by the team itself rather than imposed from above. All staff communications can be valued by some

staff, but find out the 'information needs' of different parts of your organisation. Avoid over-information, as habits typically form to ignore the whole communication, especially in the context of political messaging.

5. Value learning at individual, project team, and organisational levels

Learning is often forgotten about in busy and fast paced environments. But creating space for learning can help create efficiencies in the medium to longer term. Simple periodic, project debriefs can be motivationally energising and forward-focused leading to improvements and even innovations. Beyond projects, committing to sharing learning across project organisations underpins a climate of openness, risk-taking and sharing, and creates a climate which welcomes adaptation to the way business is done. Indeed, projects are fertile ground for doing business differently.

The success of the levelling up agenda, despite the critical comments surrounding it, will be determined by the leaders and project teams driving it. Let us create the conditions to enable them to do it and deliver a transformative agenda – both through the projects themselves, but also in the organisations that partner to deliver longer-term innovation in our public services and communities. ▶

Prof Tony Wall, Christine McDonald and Rachel Robins are coaches and consultants at The Conversation Company