

Making space for the big picture

Senior officers and leadership teams find it near impossible to make space away from operational agenda – but **Christine McDonald, Dr Rachel Robins and Professor Tony Wall** explain why it is critical



Are you the leader or a member of a senior management team; have you found yourself and your colleagues drowning in operational delivery and fighting for headspace? Is everything urgent and last minute? We find the senior teams we work with know they need to find the headspace for strategic thinking and planning, but are struggling to translate this desire into real space.

As leadership team coaches, we have found the transition out of the pandemic has left some local government executive teams stuck in a pattern of daily operations. The delivery of big issues with 'gold command style' responses to anticipated issues.

Looking under the surface, and spending some time reflecting as a team, they begin to see the immediate response is no longer serving its purpose. The appetite for strategic thinking is back. The budgetary and national requirements for local authorities means that being more efficient and continuing to polish

today's delivery will not be enough – new ideas and transformational changes are needed to meet growing demands on a smaller budget.

To create a vision for this transformed tomorrow, strategic headspace is needed: strategic thinking is a creative process, not a transactional one. It needs time and space for innovative thinking on how complex issues can be addressed in a new way.

Emotional space for big picture, big opportunity thinking is needed

As a senior team, you need to be able to have conversations which connect hard and soft data, emotions and vision. From our experience, this doesn't happen when everyone is in back-to-back meetings. It is difficult to find vision and forward thinking when you are focused on the immediate future.

Strategies need time, co-operation and a collegiate approach to be

successful; how many strategies have you had to sign up to that you had not developed yourself?

Physical space to support big picture, big opportunity thinking needs to be away from the physical spaces of daily operations – and in person. Our experience is that the development of emergency online working has brought with it a transactional and task-based approach to communication. Once senior management are together in a physical space, they thrive from the connections, from putting phones and laptops away and from being present in the moment. Strategic space in person cuts through the transactional and task-based focus and can create sparks and bursts of insight.

Emotional space for big picture, big opportunity thinking is needed. The likelihood is that there are new members of your leadership team who have been selected, recruited and who work remotely – how well do you know your team and how it thinks?

Our experience is that people work better with people they know and are more willing to share daring new ideas with people they trust. Knowing and trusting each other in a senior team requires a level of psychological safety that enables challenge. This can only be created when the whole team knows for certain that the challenge will not have an adverse effect.

But we all have busy diaries. So, how do we do it? In our experience, the best way to do this is pick a date and start. Some immediate things that you can action include:

- Clear the diaries – give everyone their jobs back and let operational leaders lead. It is likely that you and your team have inherited operation tasks that have no place on your to do list.
- Ask for help – ask an independent person to run the day to keep you focused on a conversation. This could be from your organisational development team or a trusted leader.
- Get out – relocate your strategic

space away from the office. Nothing will drag a senior team back in to operation work quicker than the strategic development being held in the office. All it takes is a knock on the door.

- Use creative tools to encourage new ideas – we have found visual support such as pens and flip charts as well as prompt cards and Lego useful for top teams to think creatively.

- Once you have started – commit to long-term strategic thinking. This could be from agreeing a regular time for these types of discussions to deciding a governance structure to implement your plans. The key is to commit to something which continues the conversation. ■

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