Successful Local Authority Transformation: Check-List

Introduction

The following check-list is intended as a constructive provocation for leaders in local authority and other public service organisations, as they consider how best to approach the enormous transformations now being demanded of them – whether as a result of budget pressures, service-user dissatisfaction and/or scrutiny from wider stakeholders such as central government and the media.

It is based on insights derived from our own work in and around these organisations during recent years – and is rooted in a deep concern that many of the different forms of public sector ‘transformation’ currently underway will prove highly unsatisfactory, if not destructive. The main dangers are:-

• They do not deliver the transformation in services being promised.
• They do not produce the required financial savings - meanwhile wasting vast sums on external service providers and internal inefficiencies.
• They fail to engender the progressive institutional changes that have been touted – for example delivering ‘customer first’, joined-up services, with minimal bureaucracy. Instead, stress points within organisations become intensified, staff get demoralised and the ‘ethos’ of public service is damaged.
• Senior leaders, including politicians, avoid accountability and learning – so reproducing or extending the above problems unnecessarily.

To organise our ‘check-list’, we have identified 4 inter-related dimensions of potential dysfunction, which we have used as sub-headings. Under each of these we’ve outlined specific issues that need deeper consideration by leaders embarking on ‘transformation’.

Political Dimension

Q1: Are the key politicians openly and accountably aligned to the transformation’s objectives and means, so minimising opportunities for them to ‘play politics’ as the work evolves?

The more ambitious the transformation, the more solid ‘leadership at the top’ needs to be, in order to provide a sufficiently sturdy platform for the work, so that the officers involved feel supported in taking courageous decisions and bringing their creativity and humanity to the task.

Where the ‘means’ of transformation involves e.g. unfamiliar investment models, or innovative relationships with 3rd parties, it is vital to invest the time and resource in helping the key elected members to really understand what this will involve, so that they have the confidence required to make wise and timely decisions when needed.

Q2: Has sufficient preparatory work been done to ensure the politicians and executive officers are clear about their distinctive roles – so that their relationship can be mutually supportive, rather than undermining?

The more challenging the task, the more vital it is that roles are clear and that the different parties are entrusted to play their particular part as only they can – while reaching out for help where they’re feeling under-skilled. It is difficult to overstate the corrosive effect further into a complex system, when the relationships at the top are characterised by mistrust, scheming and interference.
Leadership

Q3: Has the Executive sufficiently defined where ownership of, and responsibility for, the work of transformation lies, with power allocated accordingly?

Too often, responsibility for transformation is allocated narrowly to a ‘Director of Transformation’ (or equivalent) without ensuring i) relevant responsibilities are also explicitly assumed by others on the Executive team, including the Chief Executive and relevant Heads of Department; and ii) those individuals with key responsibilities, including any Director of Transformation, have sufficient formal power to be able to deliver against them.

If the goal is ‘whole system’ transformation, then each member of the entire Executive team needs to be clear about the part they have to play – and to have the capacity to deliver against this.

Q4: Is the Executive team aligned and playing a ‘One Team’ game?

Nothing will undermine attempts at radical organisational change quicker, than a fractured top-team divided by vested interests and disagreements about the best ways forward.

Q5: Are leaders leading?

Transformation work requires leaders to stand up and be counted – rather than hide behind ‘programme boards’, colleagues with ‘Transformation’ in their job-title and/or third party suppliers. Staff and other stakeholders will need leaders to do what only they can: provide a compelling rationale for what’s happening; respond to concerns; clarify priorities; push for extra effort at critical moments; model courage, integrity and determination – and so on.

Q6: Are key leaders appropriately skilled?

Many otherwise skilful and experienced leaders are not necessarily natural leaders of radical, complex change – and where there is so much at stake, it would be wise to find ways of providing focused, ‘just-in-time’ skills and support where necessary.

Key areas to consider are:- choice of change strategy and its implications e.g. to what extent are the changes to be driven via a distinct programme, or worked more emergently through existing operational realities? How well is the vision for change being articulated? How boldly are the tough messages about performance and financial realities, for example, being communicated? How skilled are your leaders in supporting people through the emotional journey of change: responding well to legitimate expressions of concern, while also remaining clear about the harsh realities needing to be faced?

The Transformation Model

Q7: Are you sufficiently clear about the implications of the ‘transformation model’ you have chosen – and where you need to be especially sharp to ensure success?

For every ‘transformation model’ currently being pioneered around the country, there are potential benefits and drawbacks – yet it is not clear that local authorities have sufficiently anticipated the drawbacks and acted to mitigate the risks involved.

For instance, where lucrative, long-term contracts with private sector service providers are being agreed, are local authorities ensuring that they have the experience and capacity to be suitably demanding and tough clients?

Where radical out-sourcing is occurring, is sufficient focus being paid to the quality of joined-up, strategic
leadership at the centre to ensure integrated – rather than fragmented – future service provision?

Where innovative Joint-Ventures have been formed between a Council and private-sector service provider, is enough being done to ensure that a certain cosiness between the parties doesn’t prevent appropriately robust forms of contracting and delivery?

Q8: Is the transformation work sufficiently service-focused?

Most people working within local authority organisations are motivated by the sense of delivering quality services to the communities they care about. Any transformation work therefore needs to be framed very clearly in terms of the whys and wherefores of future levels of service provision – even if the driving rationale is financial.

That means, for example, that even if transformation is being ‘led’ by back-office changes - to achieve financial savings and set up a platform for more efficient forms of service provision – appropriate attention must nevertheless be devoted to the ultimate needs of front-end service providers, instead of them left feeling ‘done to’ and possibly without the ‘fit for purpose’ infrastructure that was initially promised.

Q9: Will the transformation model deliver the desired cultural and behavioural changes?

Much local authority transformation is looking to achieve behaviour shifts in the work-force, as well as deliver efficiencies and service improvements. Frequently this includes aspirations such a more joined-up working, customer focus, greater individual responsibility-taking and alignment with a set of organisational values.

However, there is a widespread delusion that this can somehow be tackled as a ‘bolt-on’ part the transformation project, while the rest of the transformation work is progressed via ‘values-and-behaviours-as-usual’! The contradiction is particularly extreme when the transformation work is centred on IT innovations and apparently driven by technical consultants rather than more people-oriented, organisation leaders – leading to more of a victim mentality among staff, rather than anything approaching the opposite.

It’s important to recognize that the work of culture change has to be woven into the core of the transformation work itself – otherwise staff immediately recognize the contradictions inherent in saying one thing and doing another, and this fatally weakens the entire project.

Finally, too much ‘behaviour change’ is currently addressed at a relatively superficial, individual-cognitive level – leading to poor returns on costly investments in both money and people’s time. There are now much more sophisticated ways of focusing instead on the ‘systemic levers’ underlying staff behaviours – enabling efficient, profound and sustainable behaviour change across entire organisations, at speed...

Operationalising Transformation

Q10: Are you communicating about the transformation work in a way that is compelling, responsive and encourages the intended cultural shifts?

When people are facing change they don’t need reassurance, but truthfulness and something to be aiming for that they believe to be genuinely worthwhile. They also need meaningful opportunities to process personal fears, as well as name what they see as not working. Leaders need to be able to hold the bigger picture and continually relate whatever is happening to this. Cascading of key messages needs to be effective – as does information flow the other way, such that leaders are seen to respond quickly to legitimate concerns. Achievement against key milestones should be clearly celebrated. The mode of communication needs to be congruent with the cultural shifts being attempted: for instance, it’s
no use leaders on the one hand talking about staff becoming liberated to show greater initiative, while on the other issuing top-down commands, such that initiative-taking is actually stifled.

Q11: To what extent are all transformation meetings, project teams and external providers operating in a way that is modeling the future vs. reinforcing the past?

It is important that those heavily involved in delivering transformation find ways of exemplifying the new forms of Council activity that are being talked about. This is not just a question of showing others how it could or should be, but of gradually instituting the new habits that will underpin the transformed ways of working in the future.

So key transformation meetings should be modeling noticeably improved, transformed ways of working – aligned with the particular qualities that ‘transformation’ is promising to deliver. For example, this might include:- high-quality, visible leadership, ‘One Team’ behaviours and responsibility-taking, less committee-oriented ‘risk-management’, more focused agendas, sharper decision-making and so on.

Similarly, there might be tougher performance-review conversations, and greater robustness between peers and/or managers and direct reports in naming what isn’t working, what needs to improve and how this might quickly be achieved.

Q12: Are the realities of ‘business as usual’ being properly acknowledged, and is the transformation work being progressed in a way that enables people to both attend to what is important now, as well as contribute to how things might be different in the future?

In order to engage constructively with any transformation agenda, staff need clear acknowledgement of their current work-load and the pressures they are under to deliver ‘as usual’ in the here and now. Leaders need to frame especially well how staff are expected to both continue to deliver their best via the current operating model and begin switching to new ways of working – without letting down their key stakeholders, or being unfairly over-worked, in the process.

There is considerable skill involved in finessing the way transformation work interacts with business-asusual to gain maximum traction. In some instances, it will be appropriate to have transformation work-streams working in parallel with existing activities until some form of ‘launch’ when everything changes. In other instances, transformation is likely to occur most effectively if catalysed in more emergent ways, via existing work – enabling people to experiment, co-create ways forward, and find out for themselves what really works best...

On a similar theme, it can often be powerful to catalyse change through an internal team of change agents: however, it is important that they are supported to play their insider-outsider roles with appropriate skill. Otherwise they can find themselves adopting a ‘heroic’ change role that places them apart from the staff they are trying to influence, in way that alienates and creates resentment. Or they collapse under peer pressure and loyalty to the organisation they know, remaining impotent ‘insiders’.

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