

## **Leading Like a gardener, The MJ**

**By Gavin Jones and Stephen Kavanagh | 15 November 2017**

In my last article I set out why I think the learning organisation is such an important concept for us to get to grips with. In this article I want to explore the issue of leadership in the context of the learning organisation and I want to do that together with Stephen Kavanagh, the Chief Constable of Essex.

We have been working together on the wicked issues confronting Essex for the last eighteen months. We run very different organisations, with different cultures and professional groupings, but the outcomes we seek for our communities and the leadership challenges we face are in many ways very similar.

A few months ago we held a joint session for our senior staff to which we invited Matthew Syed the Times columnist and author of Black Box Thinking to give us the benefit of his recent research in to leadership. It was a stimulating session and sparked lots of thoughts about the role of the leader and the metaphors we use to characterise the nature of leadership. The idea that struck us most forcibly was the notion that great organisations do not hide failure; they learn from it systematically to drive future improvement. They are organisations whose commitment to learning is the force that drives them forwards.

Stephen had recently been reading Stan McChrystal's Team of Teams which provides a great example of making sense of conflicting, competing and changing notions of leadership.

McChrystal's key insight is that the nature of heroic leadership that he was taught at West Point provided the wrong model for the complex, fast changing, operating environment he found in Iraq confronting the threat of Al Qaeda. McChrystal's metaphor for that traditional model of leadership is the chess player – moving around pieces on the board – suggesting a level of perfect oversight and agency wholly at odds with the ability to actually process information from multiple centres of operation in real time.

So if chess is not the metaphor for modern leadership, what is? McChrystal offers the notion of the gardener. He describes the leader not as a controlling puppet master but as the 'empathetic crafter of culture' and the shift from chess master to gardener as being driven by the fact that 'the move-by-move control that seemed natural to military operations proved less effective than nurturing the organization – its structure, processes and culture'.

So that's our task. It seems simple but in reality these are the big tests of leadership. We are confronted today by new ever evolving threats - from terrorism to cyber-crime; new challenges – from an ageing population to low economic growth; and new opportunities – from big data to artificial intelligence. New skills, new mindsets, and new ways of working are required in order for us to respond in a meaningful way to these new issues that refuse to be defined according to our conventional terms of reference.

Our job as leaders of the two largest public sector organisations in Essex is to develop cultures – data-led, underpinned by innovation, and focused on the whole system, that are capable of addressing these long-term shifts in orientation whilst continuing to address today’s immediate tasks. And the approach we are adopting for individuals in our services, for the teams they work in, and for our organisations as part of a larger eco-system is to invest much more time in jointly and collaboratively reflecting on what works, learning lessons as we go along as a deliberate and considered part of our approach, and building a culture that is reflective, curious and open to not having all the answers at the outset. This is challenging.

Two examples illustrate what this means in practice.

First, we recognise that across our organisations there is huge untapped potential in the data we hold. We are developing a proposal for an Essex Centre of Data Analytics. But whereas in the past we might have invested all our energy in to constructing a perfectly formed business case that attempts to tie together all the loose ends, in this instance we are testing and learning as we go along.

We are piloting approaches to data sharing and predictive analytics on real life cases, learning the lessons as we go, and reshaping and refining our approach in the light of what we find. Our first product has been to identify young children who might be at risk of not being school ready. By bringing together police, district, and county data and applying predictive risk algorithms to the information, we have been able to present a picture of where the areas of greatest risk lie. We wondered whether this might just be telling people what they already know. Not a bit of it. When we recently unveiled the product of this work to a group of parents, school teachers and social workers on the patch they were initially surprised and then able to begin to piece together a story about why historical interventions hadn’t had the impact they had expected – principally because they had been in the wrong places!

Second, we are sponsoring a leadership collaborative. A joined-up effort to bring together 50 of our brightest public service leaders from across organisations in Essex to focus on some of our wicked issues but in doing so building deep collaborative networks across our organisations, developing skills in systems thinking, and supporting individuals to reflect on their own ways of working and capability to influence outcomes. As we do that, we are also learning how best to get the most out of this collaboration and building that learning in to how we design its next iteration.

We know that much of this work is an investment for the long-term. And when there are so many short-term problems to fix it is a challenge to carve out the space for this activity. And as the leaders of our organisations we are also tempted to dive in and solve problems rather than nurture the capacity of our organisations to do that for themselves. So the challenge is not just for others it is also for us – we need to recognise as McChrystal puts it that ‘the gardener cannot actually “grow” tomatoes, squash, or beans’ – we can only foster an environment that enables that to happen.