

# Storytellers in Chief

*How top local government managers  
use storytelling to lead*

Mike Bennett and Kevin Orr



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**Dedication: In memory of Michael Agar, 1945-2017**

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# Introductions from ICMA / Solace / CAMA

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A global recession, a decade of austerity and widespread political turbulence has dramatically changed the context of public service and what it means to be a leader. Traditional authority has declined in public life, in elected politics and in organisations across the world.

There has arguably never been a more important time to have highly skilled public servants working for the benefit of their communities and storytelling is one way in which contemporary leaders have been developing their practice to find new ways of connecting to, and engaging with, the public, politicians and staff.

Based on more than one hundred interviews on both sides of the Atlantic, this report has been jointly commissioned by Solace, ICMA and CAMA which together represent chief executives, city managers, chief administrative officers and other senior managers across the United Kingdom, the USA, Canada and beyond. In it the authors present evidence that senior professional leaders have responded to the challenges of the last decade by adapting their leadership repertoire. As one British chief executive memorably put it, they seek commitment, not just compliance. And for that they need to engage the emotions and values of their staff and politicians.

We hope you find this report useful in helping to write the next chapter in your leadership career.



# Foreword from Marc Ott, ICMA

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In spite of the superlative public trust they enjoy, local governments face the same crisis of confidence plaguing democratic institutions across the globe. As local government managers, we must find reliable ways to overcome the caustic discord emblematic of our time and bring people together to support their communities. Doing our jobs effectively has always meant embracing the tools to connect with our colleagues, elected officials, and constituents as people, and those tools are more important now than ever. Storytelling is among the most powerful tools to accomplish this.

Storytelling is an essential way for public managers to leverage the fundamental humanity of government for community ends. Group identity, from family to neighborhood to nation, can often be defined by mutually treasured stories. Only food and language rival the ability of stories to bring people together.

A lack of understanding is often the culprit behind apparent disagreement. This can be difficult to overcome, especially with the rise of the “attention economy,” which thrusts our essential messaging into competition with entertainment, advertising, communications technology, and other media. We must work harder than ever not only to keep our colleagues and communities informed but interested. Bringing ideas to life with stories that are understandable and repeatable can often mean the difference between apathy and agreement.

To do our jobs effectively, we must recognize that our work begins rather than ends with fulfilling our professional commitments to objectivity and ethical leadership. Storytellers in Chief can help us embrace the role beyond our bedrock commitments and face the myriad challenges of our time. It will prove to be an essential tool for local government managers to better connect with stakeholders and continue to set the example of civility and efficacy. ICMA is grateful to Mike Bennett and Kevin Orr for producing this timely and important research and to Solace and CAMA for helping us to support it.



**ICMA**

# Foreword from Marc Landry, CAMA

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## Leadership in Municipal Government

The word “leadership” can bring to mind a variety of different things to different people. I believe that leadership is about making a difference on a daily basis and creating a better organization for everyone. Leaders set direction, build an inspiring vision, and create something new. While leaders set the direction, they must also use management skills to guide their team to the right destination, and make changes at the appropriate time in a smooth and efficient way to steadily improve the current performance.

Leaders can also inspire others in a number of ways. Storytelling is an effective way for leaders to communicate and establish strong connections and relationships at all levels.

Navigating the relationship between Administration and Council as a top local government manager can be challenging. For this reason, it is necessary to show leadership and maintain neutrality as a local government manager and understanding the separation between the roles and responsibilities of the administrative function versus the roles and responsibilities of elected officials and Council is critical. A positive working relationship between a Council and their local government manager is vital for a municipality to achieve their goals. Strong political acuity can help to identify when Council’s direction may be changing, and adjustment is needed. Political acumen is about maintaining the right balance that is appropriate for each particular situation.

Storytelling is a very powerful tool to help us all become better leaders. Every story contains a lesson and helps us to strive to be better. I would encourage you to continue to network with your colleagues around the world and embrace and share their stories to help us all create stronger leaders in our communities.



# Foreword from Graeme McDonald, Solace

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In isolation a word might not mean very much or carry very little weight. But, put together in the right context, words have the potential to become an incredibly powerful tool. From Boudicca to Martin Luther King, history is littered with examples of how leaders have harnessed the power of words to engage emotions, enhance intellectual understanding and invoke inspiration.

While we might not immediately think words and stories play an important part in our daily jobs they are increasingly integral to the way in which we work, and in the way we work with others. Documents and reports are commonplace in councils, but it is perhaps thought stories are less so.

And yet chief executives and senior managers listen to, understand and interpret a number of narratives emerging across multiple service areas at any given time. All of those competing plots are then weaved together to create coherent and compelling plans for our places.

Persuasive prose can also be used to help to break down bureaucratic barriers and traditional hierarchies. By encouraging partners to read from the same page, we can step out of our silos and create an environment which encourages innovation.

Our working lives can often be dominated by rational, evidence-based decision-making. While that is still incredibly important, there is also an opportunity for councils to emotionally engage with residents, businesses and other organisations. By capturing, and captivating, our communities through stories we can help to create a collective buy-in to a future vision and encourage everyone to strive towards shared goals. If, through stories, we can build a better understanding of, and support for, the mission behind our organisations that then provides a platform to deliver better outcomes.

This is all captured in Storytellers in Chief which highlights how narratives are crucial in encouraging collaboration and achieving influence.

At a time when financial resources continue to dwindle while demand rises, words and stories are becoming an increasingly valuable commodity.



# Executive Summary

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***Stories can challenge, inspire and motivate us. They can open our minds up to new experiences, ideas and concepts. Words have such power that they can help us to understand the world in which we live or imagine the world we would like to create.***

Once upon a time it was unusual to talk about storytelling and leadership in the same breath, but it is a measure of the seismic shifts in politics and public services across that world that it is now seen as a core part of the public leadership repertoire across the globe.

At a time when respect for traditional institutions and professional authority is declining, this report examines how public service leaders are adapting their leadership techniques to take account of a radically changing world. It shows that chief executives and city managers are responding to this challenge by enhancing their leadership repertoire to include storytelling and narrative work. This development involves new forms of managerial rationality, new ways of thinking about the managerial task, and different ways of building and deploying the power of motivation and influence that has always been essential to leadership.

Leadership is a dynamic process of influencing and developing people to understand why and how certain outcomes need to be accomplished. While many of those who work in local government are inspired by the power of public missions, this cannot be taken for granted, especially when staff are pulled from pillar to post and working to ever-changing external demands, often in the face of harsh criticism from national leaders and diminishing resources. A key lesson is that motivation and commitment need to be cultivated, not assumed.

Public administration leaders must tap into the motivating power of worthwhile organisational goals by infusing jobs with meaning, and highlighting and rewarding public service values. Leadership can be seen as the art of mobilising others to want to struggle for shared objectives.

This report, which is born out of a long and deep engagement of the authors with chief executives and city managers, is the first major empirical study of its kind. It brings together academic insight and practitioner relevance and provides new ways of thinking about the leadership demands of tomorrow in our changing world. The research design is rooted in a long-term engagement with local government senior professional leaders.

The empirical method of this research stems from work undertaken between 2008 and 2018 during which the authors jointly interviewed over 90 local council chief executives in different types of UK councils, including county, district, metropolitan, unitary and London authorities, spanning different geographical locations across all four nations of the UK. In 2017 the authors worked closely with expert researchers from ICMA who interviewed 30 city managers and chief administrative officers from the USA and Canada.

The major themes that emerged from this research across the UK, USA and Canada are that senior professional leaders use storytelling for the following purposes:

- 1. Creating an emotional connection;**
- 2. Making sense of what's going on;**
- 3. Challenging practices and assumptions;**
- 4. Managing in a political environment;**
- 5. Developing and learning.**

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## Theme 1: Creating an Emotional Connection

One of the key ways in which senior professional leaders use stories is to create an emotional connection with the audience. This emotional connection seeks to go beyond a purely rational form of argumentation and to influence, move and motivate. To lead with integrity requires facts deployed with reason - not dogma deployed with duplicity. But to get people to pay attention, one needs to make the moral case that speaks to their hearts, not just their heads.

The acknowledgement of emotion as part of managerial rationality and practice is a radical shift. Modern public administration relied on a way of viewing certain professions as beyond the fray of politics. There were ways of arriving at consensus in administrative decision making that was based on disinterested expertise. ***But this lens of objectivity has cracked as trust has declined and the claims of experts can no longer be entirely separated from the question of prior interests and emotions.***

This wave of argument has contributed to the importance of stories – as well as identity, rituals and symbols – in contemporary public leadership.

One UK chief executive explained that stories create an emotional and motivating connection: “Leadership requires storytelling. It requires empathy, it requires imagination and pictures ... without that, we can’t manage people. We can get their compliance but we can’t ever get their commitment.” This report provides evidence to show how stories allow senior professional leaders to project empathy, show what is important, to connect emotionally and to encourage commitment to shared goals and shared identity in ways that traditional authority models cannot achieve.

## Theme 2: Making Sense of What’s Going On

Local councils exist in a complex environment with multiple, and what can sometimes feel like, conflicting accountabilities. We often look to senior professional leaders to make sense of this complexity for others. A powerful means of achieving this goal is through a story that changes the way that others understand their environment and shows the possibilities for positive action. Leaders often use stories to construct a narrative that draws out apparent contradictions, conflicts and dilemmas and brings to life the choices that members of the organisation face collectively. This exercise of moving from the abstract to the animated can produce an engaging sense of purpose, and provide an inviting basis for collaboration.

As one US city manager put it, “I find that storytelling is an invaluable tool when you’re trying to get some complex concepts over to others. Through storytelling I find that in a lot of cases you can make your point very distinctly, people get it very quickly and they retain the information a lot better.”

As one UK chief executive said, ***“I’m very aware of the value of storytelling - in my current role you are required to sort of be the narrator in chief - both to the organisation and to the wider world.”*** The chief executive sees themselves not as the commander in chief at the top of the hierarchy, but the narrator in chief, someone who must lead through storytelling.

**Storytelling, in other words, is a different form of managerial rationality – a different way of thinking. It is an alternative way of building and deploying the power of motivation and influence that has always been essential to leadership.**



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### Theme 3: Challenging Practices and Assumptions

A key rationale for the role of chief executive or city manager is to create a post that focuses on the organisation as a whole, not on any one department or service. While the division of labour and specialisation is a fact of organisational life, the leader's job is not just to bring those fragments together, it is also to question the contribution those specialisms make to the whole.

It is the chief executive or city manager's role to provide direction, challenge and support to the most senior professional leaders in their organisations. This often takes the form of critical questioning rather than seeking to override decisions: stories provide a medium for this form of challenge.

One senior leader told us:

"I've always thought that to convince someone of anything you need probably to articulate their truth in a way which is better than they could. So, you'll try and identify the truth of the other, whatever it is, articulate it for them and then say why it's wrong and why there's another truth that's better... But if you just say 'No, I believe in this, ... just follow me', you've got no chance."

The report shows how change that is based on mutual understanding is an emergent process accomplished in a network of viewpoints, where the chief executive seeks to **show** a wider perspective. Unsettling some narrow professional assumptions along the way is seen as a necessary part of the job.

### Theme 4: Managing in a Political Environment

The relationship between elected politicians and administrators is a fundamental question in the study and practice of public administration. Our research conversations provided many examples of how storytelling is used to help manage this relationship productively.

A US city manager put it this way:

"I use storytelling a great deal. You have various audiences that you're trying to communicate with, you are the pivot point between the administration, the staff and the elected officials, so you are in effect the chief policy advisor to the Mayor and Council. I found it's very effective to use stories to give examples to talk about your experiences in plain, simple terms, so that politicians understand the implications of their decisions."

In this report we see chief executives and city managers talking about the importance and mechanics of influencing the political narrative. The process must be discreet, respectful and must take account of the political leader's experience and existing frame of reference. Communications with politicians are not peer-to-peer. It is rarely the same as a discussion between policy professionals. Politicians are representatives and often have strong ideological commitments. Communication has to be able to show what is important, to present evidence and advice in a range of forms, based on constant and imaginative communication. ***The evidence in this report suggests how leadership is collective and emergent within the to-ing and fro-ing of organisational life. Political narratives are co-produced by a series of actors and networks in relation with each other.***

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## **Theme 5: Developing and Learning**

The final theme emerging from our research was the way in which stories enable effective learning and development. A core purpose is the transfer of knowledge, drawing parallels with past experiences in order to draw out lessons to be learned and the development of peers and colleagues.

It has always been part of the effective leader's role to bring on and develop successors. Stories are particularly well suited to that process of development and play an important part in 'becoming' a manager. They enable busy people to cut to the chase, to share experiences and to transfer learning. This learning can take place in the council or at collective gatherings of top managers.

Anyone who has been to a Solace, ICMA or CAMA conference will have observed chief executives and city managers telling stories to each other as a means of establishing their credentials, networking and building relationships. This happens over breakfast, during coffee, during business partner dinners and often late into the evening over a drink at the conference bar. Chief executives and city managers in local government come from many different backgrounds and their local or personal networks rarely overlap. We found that stories play a role in enabling senior professional leaders to communicate and learn directly about issues of common interest.

One city manager told us, "the value of having the associations get together is networking and sharing experiences that you've had within your organisation with others, and using that experience to then go back and convey to your team, we're not alone in this. Others have either similar challenges or similar opportunities and we can learn from: here's an experience, or here's a story I heard from a peer."

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## Key Research Findings and Implications for Practice

*An at-a-glance summary of the main learning points generated by the study.*

1. Stories have a leadership purpose.
2. Stories can focus on dilemmas and show the consequences of different choices.
3. Stories can show a sequence of events and draw out the moral and practical significance of decisions.
4. Stories can reduce the distance between the narrator, the audience and the drama, bringing the listener to the heart of the action.
5. Stories can generate an emotional connection helpful to motivating and influencing staff.
6. Stories can talk about mission, identity and outcomes, cutting across professional and departmental boundaries and engage people with a shared sense of context and purpose.
7. Stories can help challenge and reframe the assumptions that underlie the practice of local government professionals.
8. Stories can be used to pass on knowledge and wisdom from past experience.
9. Stories can be a form of currency traded for credibility and status.
10. Attention to stories and narratives helps us understand leadership influence as collective and collaborative. Leadership is social, not heroic. It is accomplished through relationships and relies on influence.
11. Attention to stories can change their status as an inferior form of data. It propels us to regard them as important sources of knowledge, learning, and sensemaking.
12. Traditional understandings of leadership continue to influence leadership training, recruitment and practice. A re-conceptualisation of leadership as social implies a need for changes to leadership training, professional development and how leaders are hired. This point is worth discussing in depth and we do so in Section 13.
13. The idea of leadership as storytelling also raises ethical dilemmas. In an era of disinformation and debates about facts and truths, what is the status of our stories? What responsibilities do leaders carry as tellers of stories and how can we best approach these?
14. Remember: even if you are not getting your story out, others will be. Is being a good story teller an optional extra in public leadership?

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## Implications for leadership development

Our study points to the need for a fresh look at leadership development in local government.

The goal of leadership development is to cultivate practitioners who engage others to mobilise collectively for the achievement of public good. Skilful leadership requires operating amidst polyphony and attending to the voices of the silenced or the marginalised.

Attention to the significance of stories and narratives in public organisations suggests the importance of developing skills in listening to the tales of others, as well as in crafting and telling purposeful stories. Leaders have an ethical duty to develop an ear for stories so as to better understand the truths of others.

Stories are a rich basis for a common identity, honouring colleagues and past struggles and achievements. ***Stories are also a powerful way of gathering people to imagine – together – compelling visions of a better future.***

## Conclusion

Leadership – in public service, in government or anywhere else – is just as tough as it ever has been but the ways to wield influence in this transformed world are changing. At the same time trust and respect for professional managers and their expertise is in decline. Large-scale bureaucracy was designed to level social and economic differences. The predictability and regularity of rule-based decisions was intended to eliminate privilege and bolster equality and fairness before the law. Yet, the role of managers as disinterested experts and administrators has become more and more contested

Storytelling is a key way in which top managerial leaders are responding to these trends. Our research explores a shift to a new paradigm. We show that many professional leaders find this way of achieving influence – ‘showing through stories’ – more effective than ‘telling through authority’. These are both perfectly valid forms of communication and it is the ‘telling through authority’ which has traditionally been privileged in professional discourse. Storytelling is, however, a different form of managerial thinking. It is a different way of building and deploying the power of motivation and influence that has always been essential to leadership. In a world where the authority of experts and leaders has declined, stories represent an alternative way of moving, motivating and persuading.

The stories that have been curated here illuminate how the everyday dilemmas of organising and leading are inescapably collective. A multitude of stories and storytellers are at large at any one time. Storytelling is a social exercise in sense making and choice framing; it does not take place in the face of uncritical, passive recipients. The contemporary leadership challenge is social, not heroic. Organisational leaders conceptualise the dilemmas organisations and communities face. In this way, stories and narratives form the very stuff of public leadership.

Our research highlights ways in which storytelling is a means for working with and through others, encouraging collaboration, developing the next generation, passing on knowledge and forging a common identity. Storytelling is a way of achieving influence, of moving, motivating and persuading others to take action in pursuit of the public good.

# I. Introduction

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- 1.1** Once upon a time, many years ago, in the heart of London’s Westminster, the weekly briefing for Solace members was being prepared. Sent out religiously, early every Friday afternoon, the briefing contained a concise summary of the week’s activities together with calls for action, member contributions and postings of general interest. That week in 2008, the briefing included a paragraph very gently broaching the idea of a new research project on “storytelling and leadership”, inviting council chief executives to take part in a research study through an interview with the co-authors of this study, a practitioner and an academic.
- 1.2** There had been some scepticism in certain parts of Solace about how storytelling was relevant to the mission as a leadership organisation. Might we be seen to be trivialising the important professional responsibilities of chief executives and senior managers? Would the membership be willing to support this kind of venture? What would happen if the project were picked up by a cynical press, looking for an opportunity to bash local government executives? Although these were genuine concerns, the paragraph was included, subject to a few amendments to ensure the text was as sober and serious as possible.
- 1.3** Over the next few days positive responses from chief executives wanting to take part in the research began to flow in and the research took off. While it turned out that the idea of storytelling and leadership resonated with a huge number of chief executives, there were also some who saw it as flippant, as “pop sociology”, as too theoretical, or just otherworldly. As one chief executive said, “it is amazing what academics write tomes about.”
- 1.4** Looking back, the lesson of this origin story is that it signals how far things have changed. ***Once upon a time, talking about storytelling and leadership was seen as eccentric, now it is being seen as a core part of the leadership repertoire in public leadership across the globe.***
- 1.5** This report has been jointly commissioned by Solace, ICMA and CAMA which together represent chief executives, city managers, chief administrative officers and other senior managers across the United Kingdom, the USA, Canada and beyond.<sup>1</sup>
- 1.6** They share a mission to develop and support their members who encompass the most senior cadre of leadership professionals in local government in those countries. The fieldwork that underpins the report is based on more than 120 interviews with chief executives, city managers and other senior managers. The report explores the key ways in which storytelling is used as a leadership technique in contemporary local government and highlights ideas and practices which seem to be held in common.
- 1.7** We examine how public service leaders are adapting their leadership techniques to take account of a radically changing world where respect for traditional institutions and professional authority is declining. We show that chief executives and city managers are responding to this challenge by enhancing their leadership repertoire to include storytelling and narrative work. This development involves new forms of managerial rationality, new ways of thinking about the managerial task, and different ways of building and deploying the power of motivation and influence that has always been essential to leadership.

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1. A note on nomenclature: In the UK “chief executive” is the generic term we use to talk about the most senior paid official in a local council. This is the case despite there being no statutory basis for the term and there being some diversity in actual job descriptions used in councils across the country. In the US and Canada the terms city manager and chief administrative officer are the most commonly used names. In this report for the sake of brevity we use chief executives and city managers as two generic terms for the UK and North America. For reasons of style and to minimise repetition we occasionally use other collective terms such as senior professional leaders or top managers.

## 2. Leadership and Public Service Management

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- 2.1** Understanding new developments in the theory and practice of leadership is of perennial concern to professional bodies such as Solace, ICMA, CAMA and to their members. Over recent years, a number of high quality reports and studies have been published which highlight different aspects of the contemporary leadership agenda. This report is part of that endeavour. The fabric of leadership is the skilful weaving, threading and stitching of different approaches, capacities, dispositions, moods and skills. In the ICMA's *The Effective Local Government Manager* (ICMA 2004), leadership is described as "helping shape the policy agenda, actively networking with citizens and groups, and orienting the staff and organisation toward being open and responsive to all citizens."
- 2.2** As long ago as 2005, Solace was arguing for an understanding of leadership in which authority was distributed and collaborative. The Report of the Commission on Managing in a Political Environment emphasised the need to work with political leaders saying "effective leadership of local authorities requires a clear recognition of the mutual interdependence of Chief Executives and Leaders – and between other senior officers and members" (Solace 2005). More recently, Solace has supported research into the leadership skills of the 21st Century Public Servant. This work found that 'leader-as-storyteller' was ranked highly among other roles such as resource weaver, systems architect and navigator (Needham & Mangan, 2011).
- 2.3** Anyone who looks at the rich archive of previous publications from these organisations will not see the search for a single overriding leadership attribute. Rather they will find an exploration and evolution of changing styles and skills which adapt to alternative managerial, professional and political environments. This report is no different. Readers of the research and analysis that follows will not find an argument that leadership equals storytelling. Instead we hope they will find an exposition of evidence and experience that shows that storytelling forms part of the contemporary leadership repertoire and, more importantly, explores leaders' thinking as to why it is such a powerful part of their practice.
- 2.4** This report is no different in recognising the richness of leadership practice. We set out in the following pages a detailed analysis of the evidence of how top managers use storytelling and its implications for leaders in Solace, ICMA and CAMA communities. In doing so we seek to hold up a mirror rather than offer a manifesto. Our mirror shows how leaders relate to and engage with others, how leaders combine reason and emotion to enhance cooperation. Without such collaborations, the power and authority to achieve public service outcomes is diminished.

## 3. Evidence about Leadership

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**3.1** Aside from the professional bodies' own work on leadership the other treasure trove of international evidence is the scholarly literature. A full and systematic review of this literature can be found elsewhere in other published work (Orr and Bennett 2017). Here it is interesting to note that the concerns of leaders and leadership scholars can be mutually supportive. The definition of leadership that we find emerging from this research - and which we have in mind here - is of a dynamic process of influencing and developing people to understand why and how certain outcomes need to be accomplished. Leadership, therefore, is a practice that combines individual and collective efforts to learn and achieve shared goals through organisation. Central to this concept of leadership is the creation of shared understandings and goals – a process of influencing, of shaping appreciations of context, purpose, or priorities. ***Leadership can be seen as the art of mobilising others to want to struggle for shared objectives.***

While many of those who work in local government are inspired by the power of public missions, this cannot be taken for granted, especially when staff are pulled from pillar to post, and working to ever-changing external demands, often in the face of harsh criticism from national leaders and diminishing resources. A key lesson is that motivation and commitment need to be cultivated, not assumed. Public administration leaders must tap into the motivating power of worthwhile organisational goals by infusing jobs with meaning, and highlighting and rewarding public service values.

**3.2** Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien (2012) underline the relational nature of leadership - how leaders and followers co-create meaning through interconnected relationships in highly interactive contexts. In complex organisations, you can't possibly have all the answers. You can't do it on your own. Instead you have to trust the people around you. Leaders need to build skills around collaboration, facilitation and enabling others. As Deborah Cadman, until recently the spokesperson for Solace's Leadership Development Portfolio said, "It's no longer about: 'I am the hero in my organisation'; it's actually now: 'I am a player in the system around the place'. And that's an acute difference." (Jameson 2017). Such insights highlight the need for collaborative, distributed or relational leadership.

**3.3** In the opening address to the 2017 Solace Summit, Jo Miller, the then Solace President, gave a compelling account that intertwined traditional leadership concepts with contemporary twists:

"Modern leadership is about leading in a system, with the authority to convene and the humility to serve... Developing and making the most of relationships across our place. Doing things with people, not to people, and making the very best of dwindling resources. Spotting the flaws in systems we can't change... and doing what we can as a local authority to alleviate some of the problems, to make things a bit better for our residents. Acting like a system, thinking like entrepreneurs. Gaining power and influence by giving power and influence away" (Miller 2017).

By juxtaposing authority and humility Jo Miller surfaces the limits of any individual's power in modern public leadership. She continues by playfully twinning together different aspects of the influence of local government but identifying the limits of that influence in a wider system. This deconstruction of leadership authority is not an abdication of responsibility. Rather it seeks to delineate a different agenda where the overall power to change can be grown by working with others, rather than seeking to go it alone.

- 3.4** Bob O’Neill, Executive Director of ICMA from 2002-2016, has emphasised similar themes, saying, “Our challenge is to balance humility with the need to educate stakeholders and constituents about what professional leadership and management are all about [...] Only by telling our own story [...] can we foster an appreciation of the fact that good governance, effective policy, and the efficient delivery of services every day don’t just happen. It is a partnership that is fuelled by the momentum of dedicated, professional policy makers and those who execute those policies (ICMA, 2016).” More recently, O’Neil gave a masterclass to the 2017 ICMA conference in San Antonio in which he argued that the job of city manager is a leadership position as well as managerial one. Leadership, he said, is about bridging gaps between individuals who may not otherwise see a common goal or objective. He concluded that storytelling – connecting stories with facts - is one of the quintessential leadership challenges for the 21st Century (O’Neill, 2017).
- 3.5** This is the leadership agenda in the eyes of many chief executives and city managers in the UK, USA and Canada. As Heimans and Timms argue in the recent book *New Power* (2018), “old power” is held by a few and jealously guarded. It is closed, inaccessible, and leader-driven. So-called “new power”, by contrast, “...operates differently, like a current. It is made by many. It is open, participatory, and peer-driven. The goal with new power is not to hoard it but to channel it” (Heimans and Timms 2018). Leadership is social, it is a team game, where the aim is to influence, motivate and to move others, not a heroic quest of the individual uber-mensch. One of the ways in which shared meanings are created in organisations is through narratives or stories that make sense of complexity and change.



## 4. Evidence about Narratives and Stories in Leadership

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- 4.1** The interest in stories and narrative has swept through philosophy, social sciences and management studies in recent decades. Scholarship on organisational learning has also displayed a particular interest in stories, exploring their role in improving practices, or in enabling managers to connect to competing narratives in their organisations, or to learn from new perspectives on established truths, stale practices or wicked problems.
- 4.2** Since Mintzberg's observations about managers' preferences for verbal and face-to-face channels of communication, and Kotter's insight that meeting and talking is more critical than technical business knowledge, more attention has been given to the narratives of organisational leaders and policy makers. This approach has been taken up in the study of public management and policy analysis with scholars encouraging a focus on narrative as a valuable means of appreciating what "public management leaders actually do".
- 4.3** The academic literature supports the importance of the collective dimensions of leadership, which have become so important given the contemporary decline in traditional authority. Leadership is accomplished through dynamic relationships which are always at play in organisations. Leadership action is inevitably embedded in complex relationships and social sense-making processes.
- 4.4** Given this social nature of leadership where relationships, influence and motivation are all important, stories offer a powerful form of communication. According to Marshall Ganz, stories contain three key elements: plot, character, and moral. The effect of the story also depends on crucial environmental factors: who tells the story, who listens, where they are, why they are there, and when (Ganz, 2011). A story is a way of giving an account of events from which the reader draws significance - a moral point. Stories, therefore, can be used to bring to life in the other's mind the consequence of a sequence of actions. Stories are a way of showing people the connections in complexity. You will, dear reader, find both plot and complex contexts, if you dare to read on...

## 5. Research Methods

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- 5.1** Our research design is rooted in a long-term engagement with local government senior professional leaders. Our empirical method stems from work undertaken between 2008 and 2018 during which the authors jointly interviewed over 90 local council chief executives in different types of UK councils, including county, district, metropolitan, unitary and London authorities, spanning different geographical locations across all four nations of the UK. In 2017 we worked closely with expert researchers from ICMA who interviewed 30 city managers and chief administrative officers from the USA and Canada. In all interviews, participants were invited to respond to a range of story, narrative and leadership-themed questions about themselves, their council, their colleagues, their profession and their practices, such as ‘Do you recognise storytelling as part of your day-to-day leadership practice?’ and ‘How and why do you use stories?’ This was supplemented with face-to-face conversations with city managers [at the ICMA’s Annual Conference in San Antonio in 2017, including a Learning Lounge Conference Session](#), where preliminary results of the study were shared and discussed with delegates, and during which participants offered further stories.
- 5.2** Since then further face-to-face interviews with city managers have been conducted in the US by the authors. Provisional findings were also showcased at the Solace annual conference in November 2017. These [public forums at ICMA](#) and Solace provided further important opportunities to sense-check our findings, to generate more insights, and to connect us with further research participants.
- 5.3** More details and more developed reflections on our methodological approach can be found in other publications (Orr & Bennett [2009](#), [2010](#), [2012a](#), [2012b](#) & [2017](#)). [A very early version of research findings was published by the IDeA and the Local Government Leadership Centre \(Bennett & Orr, 2008\)](#)

## 6. Research Findings

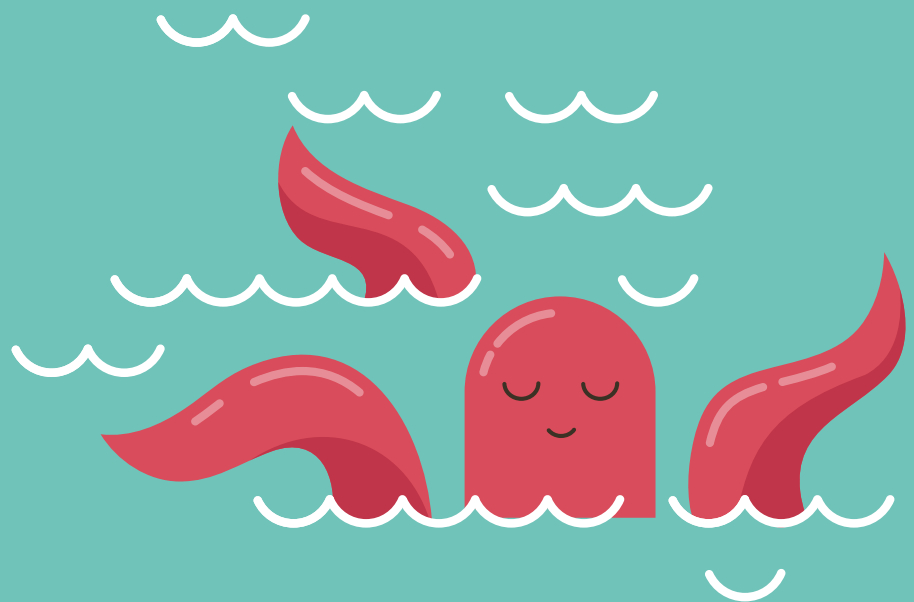
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- 6.1** The report is organised around five themes. These themes are based on the principal ways in which senior professional leaders engage in storytelling and narrative practices within a network of relations. Our research shows that these themes are common across the UK and North America. This does not mean that all chief executives and city managers use storytelling techniques in exactly the same way. There are some in the UK and in USA and Canada who do not recognise the validity of storytelling as a leadership practice at all and of course there are many variations in the ways in which senior professional leaders do employ it in their practice. However, we were struck most powerfully by the parallels between the many, many chief executives and city managers who saw storytelling as a significant element of their leadership repertoire.
- 6.2** The major themes that emerged across the UK, USA and Canada are as follows:
- 1. Creating an emotional connection;**
  - 2. Making sense of what's going on;**
  - 3. Challenging practices and assumptions;**
  - 4. Managing in a political environment;**
  - 5. Developing and learning.**
- 6.3** As well as examples of stories and narratives, our fieldwork examined senior professional leaders' explanations of their practices. ***Our research shows not just how chief executives and city managers use stories or try to influence narratives, it also explores why they do so.*** Our findings therefore integrate chief executive/city manager reflections on their practices with original stories they tell. This enables us to capture and share authentic stories and listen to chief executives and city managers as analysts in their own right. Furthermore, it means that the analysis in this report is not just that of the authors, but is fundamentally coproduced with the participants - chief executives and city managers from the UK, USA and Canada.
- 6.4** Each thematic section that follows has two parts. The first presents real stories as told to us from a range of UK, US and Canadian senior professional leaders. The second part in each section contains reflection and analysis from participants on how to interpret their own stories. The commentary from chief executives and senior managers is particularly interesting in illuminating the thinking behind their use of storytelling as a technique and how it forms part of their leadership behaviours.<sup>2</sup>

2. Names of people and places have been changed to ensure anonymity.

# 7. Theme I:

## Creating an Emotional Connection



## 7. Theme I: Creating an Emotional Connection

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- 7.1** One of the key ways in which senior professional leaders use stories is to create an emotional connection with the audience - be that staff, elected politicians or the community. This emotional connection seeks to go beyond a purely rational form of argumentation and to influence, move and motivate. It was the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume who wrote that "reason is the slave of the passions." Many contemporary leaders certainly seem to agree. To lead with integrity requires facts deployed with reason - not dogma deployed with duplicity. But to get people to pay attention, one needs to make the moral case that speaks to their hearts, not just their heads.
- 7.2** One of the most influential contemporary writers influenced by Hume is Nobel prize winning psychologist, Daniel Kahneman. Kahneman argues that most of the time we employ "fast thinking" emotions and intuitions to process data and make decisions. Fast thinking is not the same as irrational thinking – that depends on an individual's training in reasoning and logical thinking. However, because fast thinking is intuitive, it is not subject to conscious choice. It is only when fast thinking runs into trouble that we are forced consciously to employ the more methodical, logical and more difficult "slow thinking" (Kahneman, 2013).
- 7.3** Other popular management theories such as Chimp Management (Peters, 2012) also seek to articulate the importance for leaders to engage with both the emotional and rational aspects of their narrative work. Peters argues that leaders must grasp the difference between several aspects of our brains and being. Where people feel under immediate threat they are likely to react through their inner "chimp", fighting for survival. Where people feel like they are part of an authentic conversation they are more likely to respond using their "human" reflexes. Being an effective leader means being aware of the different ways in which people might react – and indeed which kind of interventions are most likely to create impulsive or reflective reactions (Peters, 2012).
- 7.4** The acknowledgement of emotion as part of managerial rationality and practice is a radical shift. Modern public administration relied on a way of viewing certain professions as "beyond the fray of politics, sentiment or opinion" (Davies, 2018). There were ways of arriving at consensus in administrative decision making that was based on disinterested expertise. ***But this lens of objectivity has cracked as trust has declined and the claims of experts can no longer be entirely separated from the question of prior interests and emotions.***
- 7.5** One leader in UK local government told us that this wave of argument has started to open up the importance of stories – as well as identity, rituals and symbols – in contemporary public leadership.
- 7.6** As one US city manager told us "You need to communicate at the intellectual level, with facts and figures and good presentations but you also have to communicate on the emotional level because that will strongly tie the two together and make it much more impactful."

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- 7.7** A long serving UK chief executive put it this way: “The purpose is to win people over to altruism... connecting people with a higher purpose and giving them a sense that they’re involved in a progressive enterprise - that it’s not just a job, that actually they are making life better in a particular locality. I do use poetic license to try to win people over to a sort of collective cause.” This chief executive accounts for their use of stories as being to evoke the moral purpose of the organisation to move staff. They encourage managers to extend their horizons from their particular area of expertise and to work in relation to the wider mission of the organisation.
- 7.8** Our first story is told by a chief executive - to their senior colleagues and, at other times, to new recruits in developmental sessions. It is the opposite of a facts and figures presentation. The story has more of the structure of a folk tale or a religious symbol with the central characters of mother and child. This chief executive reeled it out as an emotive rallying call, a reminder or an assertion of the importance of their collective efforts.

### ***Hand your baby down***

People say local government doesn’t have any power. I don’t buy that. We have incredible power in the eyes of local people. I remember when the city flooded, the whole town centre was under five feet of water.

As chief executive I was out on a dinghy with three other council workers, with lifejackets and council badges. And a woman was hanging out her window in distress, with her crying baby. We pulled up below, and Andy who was at the front of the boat stood up and stretched up his arms and said, ‘It’s OK, hand us your baby down.’ And she did.

The mother trusted us because we were from the council. That’s the level of trust people give the council – that someone will hand over their baby to us. Don’t underestimate the power and legitimacy of local government.

- 7.9** The story shows the importance of council workers and invokes their special relationship with the public. The drama of the story – the rescue of a babe in arms – produces an emotional response and casts the role of local government in a warm light. It provides a counterpoint to any gloom about the esteem of councils. They are worried that staff have developed an unhelpful sense of local government’s decline. The story brings to life a sense of team work, relationships of trust, and the council’s positive standing in the eyes of the public – even its logo is a signifier of trustworthiness. Finally, it features a chief executive showing himself to be proud of working with others, on the front line, at a time of crisis.

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- 7.10** Not all stories, of course, have the same form. This second vignette comes from a city manager from North America who illustrates the life-critical importance of some public services and how one town's tragedy had become an oft-told cautionary tale.

### ***Don't poison the well***

The public generally get engaged with the city or municipality when they are angry or they're upset. A good City Manager can again rely on examples, stories, situations that have occurred in other jurisdictions to help provide context for whatever the situation is.

Many years ago, a small town with a well-based water supply system made a terrible mistake. The ground water in the municipal system was infiltrated with livestock manure and as a consequence people got very sick and some died. The response to that was a complete rethink of how water supply is actually provided to smaller communities.

Over time that story, it was a terrible tragedy, has been repeated over and over again. "If you don't invest in your infrastructure you don't invest in improving the water quality, and you will have a situation like you had in Snowton." It is obviously very helpful in convincing the public or elected officials that they should take action and invest in infrastructure based on a story.

- 7.11** This story holds a clear moral. Public services need to be understood for their value, not just their cost. Like one of Aesop's fables, this story cautions against foolish short-termism. We also see this city manager self-consciously using this story to connect people's hearts and minds to the sense of risk and responsibility that citizens and elected officials face. This story presents investment as the moral choice that takes seriously the town's collective commitment to its citizens.

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- 7.12** Many of our interviewees identified the power that stories have to make jargon or abstract concepts such as 'our customers' or 'the public' spring to life and to appear more tangible to common sense. Our next vignette illustrates the point. It is a story one chief executive tells staff when discussing the need to improve response times to enquiries and service requests.

### ***My Granny***

I went around the building and said 'What are we going to try and do and why are we trying to do it?' And we talked about how many telephone calls get answered and all the rest, and I just told the story of my Grandmother. For a while, I lived with my Granny. She used to put her rent money behind the curtain on the window sill, and the rent man would come in and he would take it, and if my Gran had a problem – if the gate needed fixing or something – she would tell the rent man.

My Gran never rang up the council - the rent man was from the council so why wouldn't he sort it out? He was the council's representative in her home. Absolutely right. And I was explaining to staff that I'd like to create the sort of organisation where my Granny would be comfortable. Because we've all got this image of our grannies as being a little bit vulnerable but people who we cherish - 'Just imagine it's your Granny, think about it, design the service from her point of view'. So shortly after that we had Investors in People inspectors here and afterwards they said to me 'I'm sure you'll get the accreditation, it looks very good and, by the way, what's the story with your Granny?

So many people have told me about your Granny!' And it's interesting that folks don't remember how many telephone calls they're getting, but they remember the story about the Granny. It reaches, it touches them.

- 7.13** By making the service user a vulnerable family member the story makes her a more identifiable, intimate and vulnerable figure to whom almost any public servant would recognise the duty of care. It also shows how stories can be replayed and retold and come to feature in the conversations of different actors, resonating through the organisation. As with the previous stories we see the way in which stories can serve as useful stock tales for a chief executive. Such stories have an enduring quality, conveying values and action-triggering emotion.



**7.14** *What Do Senior Professional Leaders' Reflections Tell Us About this Practice?*

**7.15** Our interviewees highlighted that stories lend themselves to talking about the public mission and identity of their organisations. Stories can be harnessed in the service of the mission.

**7.16** One chief executive explained that stories create an emotional and motivating connection: "Leadership requires storytelling. It requires empathy, it requires imagination and pictures ... without that, we can't manage people. We can get their compliance but we can't ever get their commitment... If you want to shift people's perceptions of what we're doing from cold control to warm influence, then you're going to need techniques like storytelling." Their distinction between compliance and commitment suggests the difference between hierarchical authority and collaborative effort. For this top manager, effective leadership entails others feeling aligned with the same aims. In large organisations, like local councils, top managers cannot have a personal relationship with every member of staff and obviously not all staff feel motivated by traditional leadership styles. Their explanation of their practice captures how stories allow senior professional leaders to project empathy, show what is important, to connect emotionally and to encourage commitment to shared goals and shared identity in ways that traditional authority models cannot achieve. The underlying idea is that doing so can help mobilise others to want to struggle for shared objectives.

# 8. Theme 2:

Making Sense of  
What's Going On



## 8. Theme 2: Making Sense of What's Going On

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- 8.1** Local councils exist in a complex environment with multiple, and what can sometimes feel like conflicting, accountabilities. We often look to senior professional leaders to make sense of this complexity for others. A powerful means of achieving this goal is through a story that changes the way that others understand their environment and shows the possibilities for positive action. Leaders often use stories to construct a narrative that draws out apparent contradictions, conflicts and dilemmas and brings to life the choices that members of the organisation face collectively. This exercise of moving from the abstract to the animated can produce an engaging sense of purpose, and provide an inviting basis for collaboration.
- 8.2** As one city manager put it, "I find that storytelling is an invaluable tool when you're trying to get some complex concepts over to either staff or the community or Council and through storytelling or some visual or through painting that picture through the words, I find that in a lot of cases you can make your point very distinctly, people get it very quickly and they retain the information a lot better."
- 8.3** In a similar vein a chief executive reflected on the ultimate importance of being able to tell the story of their council: ***"I'm very aware of the value of storytelling – in my current role you are required to sort of be the narrator in chief, both to the organisation and to the wider world."*** In this case, the chief executive sees themselves not as the commander in chief at the top of the hierarchy, but the narrator in chief, someone who must lead through storytelling.
- 8.4** Another city manager commented that leaders have to communicate not only up and down the organisation but across the organisation. The ability to tell that story and "share that big picture concept of what we're collectively trying to achieve, is important to get buy-in from a strategic direction standpoint."
- 8.5** These senior professional leaders are expressing the need for leadership to help others make sense, to empower others by helping them see for themselves, not just to tell them what is to be done.
- 8.6** In our next story we see the city manager constructing a simple narrative, based on one of the Bible's best known parables to help explain a complex legal and regulatory decision. In the story, the council itself is involved as a community intermediary but has no formal authority in the final decision.

## ***Noah and the Ark***

We were involved in extensive negotiations with the Province around the construction of a hydroelectric dam on the river, our role was to analyse the project and also to receive comments from the community and then to negotiate a Community Measures Agreement or benefitting agreement. There was a lot of controversy around this particular project and our role was just to negotiate agreement, we are not a decision maker as to whether the dam was to proceed or not.

We had a very polarised community, the group that was Make the Lake supporters of the dam and then we had Damn the Dam opposition to the building of the dam. So in order to articulate our role in this very large project, we used the storytelling technique around Noah building the Ark. Noah wasn't in favour of the flood but he built the Ark anyway. Our community measures agreement was very much about being the Ark and about the idea that whether the floods came or otherwise, our goal was to get ready for it.

So in telling that story, you lighten that imagery, expanding on it in different presentations, and there was, from that point going forward, very little confusion as to what the city's role was in that entire project. Storytelling helped us tremendously through that process and we still use it today when we refer to our discussions and the Community Measures Agreement.

- 8.7** Here we see this city manager using a foundational story, with huge symbolic meaning, to situate and contextualise their council's strategy. The context involved a complex consultation process with numerous senior levels of government and a statutory regulatory regime - all of which was rather opaque to citizens in the community. Many were against the building of the dam and wanted to know why the council was involved. The council's explanation was to say that if the dam was built then they had better have a deal on how it would impact on the community. In other words, the leader's use of the Ark story created a neutral space between the warring factions that allowed the organisation to carry out its responsibilities without adding to the conflict.
- 8.8** A key role for many leaders is being able to anticipate what challenges might be coming over the horizon. Top managers use different ways of generating this insight and then they need to find a way of generating wider awareness, engagement and ultimately organisational action that prepares for that future. Our next story shows a city manager being struck by a powerful insight at a professional conference and then creating a story to galvanise action:

## ***Millennials versus Boomers***

I was at a National League of Cities meeting a couple of years ago and I was in a conference session on the sharing economy - Uber and Airbnb and those sorts of things. The presenters from the sharing economy were millennials, you know, cowboy boots and blue jeans and short-sleeved shirts. It was a pretty crowded room, a couple of hundred people. You had the millennial types up front and then you had, the NLC members in the audience, mostly boomers, in suits and ties. I remember some of that detail because I was seeing in my mind, this clash between the boomers and the millennials around sharing economy.

You had these elected officials who were standing behind a microphone one after another, almost pointing their finger saying you don't understand the impact you're having on neighbours, and it was really tense. So, what I've done is I've taken that experience and I come back and I talk about how it's a quintessential example of the tensions as we're moving from a sort of traditional regulated economy, where you need a business licence, respect zoning requirements and so on, to a free-for-all that you can be operating an Airbnb and no-one in your town even knows except for the neighbour that keeps seeing all this churn.

And what I'm trying to do is not say who's right or wrong but to convey this tension. What I'm doing is telling the story to say we're in the middle of it and no-one's right, or maybe everyone's right. And I promise the guy had cowboy boots and blue jeans on.

- 8.9** The clash of the generations is palpable. The city manager can see change coming, they can see winners and losers and they know it is going to be a growing issue for local governments as new economic arrangements impact on society. The story is lent a poignancy because although the professional manager seeks to avoid revealing personal opinions, they playfully ham up the shock at the millennial dress code.
- 8.10** Many interviewees also identified their role in influencing pan-organisational narratives. In other words, they see the importance of shaping how the council gets talked about, by staff or by others. A story can be deployed to support such wider narrative building. One interviewee shared a story which they regularly use to illustrate the 'direction of travel' they want their council to pursue, and the pride that staff should have in the organisation. There had been a range of unfavourable narratives circulating about their organisation.

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## ***Scruffy Old Town***

The message is I want staff to work in an organisation they feel proud of, because that hasn't always been the case. When I first arrived in Scruffton in the eighties, there were apocryphal stories about how when asked at a party who you worked for, you just said 'I work in local government.'

When you said what your profession was, you never mentioned the words Scruffton Council. So now I use a little story to illustrate what I was trying to get away from - that once, early on in my career in Scruffton, we were sent off to some management centre in the Home Counties.

We were registering at the reception desks and the lady looked up and said, 'What's your name and where are you from?' I said, 'My name's John Watson, Scruffton Council', and she said 'Oh I am sorry' - just as if I'd just reported a bereavement! It's that reaction from somebody behind a desk, saying 'Oh I'm so sorry to hear you work for Scruffton' - I thought that summed it all up.

- 8.11** This episode is used as a story in their everyday leadership practices to visualise the low point of the council's reputation and provide a contrast to the ambition and self-worth they invite colleagues to develop. The chief executive told us: "I want us to be a well-regarded authority that commands the respect of its citizens and I suppose that's my mission in life... Scruffton used to be something negative and we want to turn it into something that's more positive." They described their approach as constructing momentum around a positive narrative designed to build confidence in the organisation. The story brings the journey to life and highlights the issues the chief executive wants to emphasise. This is an example of how one leadership task is to 'change the narrative' and shows how the use of negative origin stories can be used as a critical benchmark against which successive generations of the organisation judge progress.

### 8.12 **What Do Senior Professional Leaders' Reflections Tell Us About this Practice?**

- 8.13** As one UK chief executive explained, stories communicate better and faster than other techniques. They analysed this process as akin to selling or persuasion done in a time pressured environment: "A lot of what I have to do is make sense of things so staff don't get kind of buffeted by the winds that blow. We focus in on the things that are likely to be prevailing, whether that's local or national pressures... You have not much time to speak to lots of staff and you can only do that kind of sense making - 'what kind of journey we're on' - almost a selling job with staff - by telling a story, making a coherent narrative...to take people with you."
- 8.14** The concept of the storytelling organisation is firmly embedded in the chief executives' view of their role and setting. As one chief executive reflected, **"Storytelling is enormously powerful. You cannot be a thoughtful leader of an organisation without realising how important it is, because when you ask people about the council, staff and councillors and residents will describe it in stories, not in philosophical constructs - we understand an organisation through the stories that we tell."** An implication of this insight is that leadership requires an ability to understand your relationship to the stories that others tell - to listen to them and engage with the worlds that they describe.
- 8.15** Many of our participants agreed on the power of stories to resonate more persuasively than other kinds of management data. As one put it: "How many times do you see a really good presentation of all the facts laid out before a committee, then one person comes along with a story, and it's gone? The story just undermines every single fact - the human-interest story just does it." Respondents also reflected on how storytelling runs counter to other professional traditions which prize objectivity and rationality. One suggested that using stories partly stems from a critique of traditional management: "Professionalism requires one to be detached and factual and rational and all those things... In reality, to lead a group of people and get them engaged in something, you need to be a bit more than that." **Storytelling, in other words, is a different form of managerial rationality - a different way of thinking. It is an alternative way of building and deploying the power of motivation and influence that has always been essential to leadership.**
- 8.16** Importantly, one city manager emphasised the need to be culturally appropriate: "You need to pick the right story - that's a critical piece because if you don't get the story right and the analogy right then you can add more confusion than otherwise or take it down the wrong path. The story has to be appropriate for your culture and your community as well."
- 8.17** These managers appreciate that leadership is contingent on environment and in order to shape and change realities they need to deploy management reasoning to engage with and to position themselves in relation to others' stories.

# 9. Theme 3: Challenging Practices and Assumptions





## 9. Theme 3: Challenging Practices and Assumptions

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- 9.1** A key rationale for the role of chief executive or city manager is to create a post that focuses on the organisation as a whole, not on any one department or service. While the division of labour and specialisation is a fact of organisational life, the leader's job is not just to bring those fragments together, it is also to question the contribution those specialisms make to the whole.
- 9.2** At a certain point in their career, top professional leaders are therefore liberated from any technical discipline and are required to bring a critical eye to bear on their professional colleagues. It is the chief executive or city manager's role to provide direction, challenge and support to the most senior professional leaders in their organisations. This often takes the form of critical questioning rather than seeking to override decisions: stories provide a medium for this form of challenge.
- 9.3** It is perhaps unsurprising therefore that imbued in the stories that the chief executives and city managers tell, is a desire to change the assumptions that underlie particular ways of practising. One chief executive offered an impressive philosophical explanation of how they try to re-shape the assumptions held by staff. They deconstruct opposing points of view, re-present them, and offer an alternative, more in line with their own agenda:
- "I've always thought that to convince someone of anything you need probably to articulate their truth in a way which is better than they could. So, you'll try and identify the truth of the other, whatever it is, articulate it for them and then say why it's wrong and why there's another truth that's better... But if you just say 'No, I believe in this...just follow me', you've got no chance. I think you've got to understand where people are at and you've got to try and articulate that and say why where they're at isn't good enough."
- 9.4** This story suggests that the chief executive has no confidence in the traditional hierarchical model of leadership. It is not enough just to **tell** people what to do. Instead they describe their experience of putting themselves in relation to others and of trying to generate a joint critique of practice and a shared way forward. Their aim is for colleagues to agree with the need to change. But there is an appreciation that such a mutual understanding is an emergent process accomplished in a network of viewpoints, where the chief executive seeks to show a wider perspective. Unsettling some narrow professional assumptions along the way is seen as a necessary part of the job.
- 9.5** The following stories show chief executives and city managers unsettling assumptions, provoking reflections and trying to show a different perspective.

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- 9.6** In this first story the chief executive of a UK council talked about the potential of stories to shift colleagues' understanding of their role and why working routines need to change.

### ***Open our doors***

I tell a story about customer service in this organisation when I first arrived, about meeting a woman sitting on a bench crying, waiting to get in the building because it was shut from nine to ten o'clock because the staff told us they were stressed - they'd done a survey.

The fact that we sent out notices seeking house repossession to people who had been waiting for us to process benefit applications for thirteen weeks was not considered a high enough priority for us to open our doors... I tell this story when I'm reminding people about why is it we do what we do - 'let's stay focused on our customer.' But it's an event that moved me, that taught me something about where the business was at.

It moved me and it taught me something - so I share that story because it might teach other people something. I think that's quite a different thing from describing what it will be like when we reach nirvana.

- 9.7** The chief executive observed that while such stories may not represent grand managerial visions they can be profoundly challenging. By bringing their experience to life in the story, they move the audience closer to the action so that they can have more intimate experience of this customer's experience. Like in previous examples, the telling of this story is not a one off, but something that they do frequently. The story has an unsettling purpose and they deploy it when the situation demands. It invites staff to question the extent to which their practices privilege the workforce over service users.

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- 9.8** This story is a corrective to the idea that expertise is no longer needed in organisations. In this example we see the city manager using a story to show why division and specialism are still important.

### ***In defence of silos***

I'm a farm kid and as a family we still run a farming operation. It's politically popular to talk about breaking down silos; but I argue that to allow specialisation or expertise, there's a reason why silos are put in place. Imagine if you tried to sell corn and bean at market and they were all mixed together. You'd get absolutely nothing for your product. For a high quality product you've got to separate, you've got to specialise and you've got to focus on improving the quality. You do that through silos, through separation.

Then you come together with different ingredients to build a better combination. It's one of those ways that you can kind of communicate that silos by themselves aren't necessarily bad, it's how you use the tools in that silo or the materials in that silo to build a better product, so that's the conversation we have when we have a conversation out in the community, and we have a conversation with our elected officials so they understand the importance of specialisation, the importance of expertise, that different officers have different skills sets, and it may not be the best thing to do to put those two together.

The way to do that is to use kind of analogies, a kind of a picture that they understand.

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- 9.9** Participants offered many examples of their efforts to generate changes in their organisations, focusing on the reframing of practices and assumptions. In a way that perhaps provides an echo of Jules and Vincent discussing the Royale with Cheese in the film Pulp Fiction, a city manager is re-framing the proposed rise on local taxes by comparing it to the difference in price between two different types of burger meal.

### ***Double quarter pounder with cheese***

I always put the context of the eight dollars into a double quarter pounder with cheese value meal at McDonalds. Everybody in town knows that I talk about the tax increase as a double quarter pounder with cheese value meal, and sometimes they come back and say well could we get by with a double cheeseburger value meal? And I say no, you're not going to like the product with a double cheeseburger value meal, you're going to be left wanting more.

I say, well, look at me, I'm no dainty chicken, I got to have the double quarter pounder with cheese. People understand what that is. You get a chuckle out of the crowd, they understand the relevant insignificance of rise. So, those are the conversations we have, in a kind of a good humoured way that takes the point of contention out and make it more good natured.

- 9.10** This vignette captures the ways in which leaders can try to challenge pre-conceived assumptions. It also shows how the shared, everyday cultural references can be used to demonstrate, and make tangible, difficult ideas.

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### **9.11** *What Do Senior Professional Leaders' Reflections Tell Us About This Practice?*

**9.12** The challenging of professional colleagues' assumptions often takes place through iterative exchange. One chief executive captured the dialogical nature of their interventions in re-framing professionals' understandings of their roles in the organisation. They recall a particular tension between managers of social services and the elected members whose policies were causing discontent amongst staff, based on a feeling that the service was being sidelined by the political executive. One of their strategies is to prime the Leader with a narrative to share with staff, inviting the Leader to connect his program with the priorities of the professionals. Their approach is to challenge the assumptions held by staff and, through that unsettling, begin to establish new appreciations of the organisational landscape, and the primacy of the politicians. They set out the example in this way:

"Staff delivering social services think that's the most important thing in the world... Periodically we have to put the Leader in front of big groups of staff and get him to say how much he values social care. He'll say, 'I care passionately about public service, I admire you all, you all do a difficult and important job, but my administration has particular priorities'. When staff can actually see somebody saying it and see they're obviously truthful and honest, then it's a bit easier for them...We have to keep talking them through it."

**9.13** This example concerns narrative building rather than stories. It shows how the chief executive acts to mediate the relationship between the Council Leader and staff members. The approach endeavours to bring the politicians closer to the workforce. It suggests that narrative building involves an ongoing effort at maintaining and improving relations. This is perhaps especially challenging in a context where the political executive is understood by staff to be committed to reducing the number of employees.

# 10. Theme 4:

## Managing in a Political Environment



## 10. Theme 4: Managing in a Political Environment

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- 10.1** The relationship between elected politicians and administrators is a fundamental question in the study and practice of public administration. Our research conversations provided many examples of how storytelling is used to help manage this relationship productively.
- 10.2** The first story comes from a Canadian professional leader who began their career in a municipality where the Mayor did not speak to the Chief Administrator and the Chief Administrator did not speak to the Mayor. Looking back at this formative experience, with a good dollop of humour they tell their story:

### ***Shuttle diplomacy***

**I was like Henry Kissinger going up and down the hallway with these two individuals, and that went on for about a year - all of which took place in an extremely tense environment - and then finally the Administrator was fired.**

**So, I've told that story to people who are looking to be Administrators, as a lesson, you'd better build relationships because if you don't have relationships, particularly with the Mayor, if there's no respect there, if there's no trust, then at some point in your career you're doomed.**

- 10.3** Similarly, another chief executive described their role as a “buffer” between officers and members, and said an important part of their job is to translate one part of the organisation to the other and to enable communication between officers and politicians.

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- 10.4** A second vivid story about relations with politicians – one which they use in staff development settings – is provided by another chief executive. They recount the tale in order to demonstrate the subtle art of leadership influence.

### ***Shared ideas***

A Senior Director and I wrote a book for a strategic planning series back in the day. We sent it to the publishers in February ... In May the Conservatives won a majority, and this guy John, became Deputy Leader of the council and although he had very little formal education, he was a very astute guy. Harry and I decided we would try and get him interested in strategic matters because we knew that the Leader was a 'paper clip counter', there was no way that the Leader was going to have any understanding of anything strategic so we thought we'd work on the Deputy. So, we started feeding John ideas, involving him in discussions and he was a very quick learner.

In July our book was published and we gave him a complimentary copy and he came back to us a few days later. He said he was 'very pleased to see that we'd picked up his ideas!' We'd sent it to the publishers in February, long before he was on the scene, but he genuinely believed that they were his ideas and that we'd used them in our book! I tell that as a story about how, although visible leadership is very important, so is invisible leadership. Sometimes people will only be led if they think it was their idea in the first place.

- 10.5** The chief executive is developing the strategic awareness of the political leader through talk and reading. The story suggests how ideas emerge within a relational network and are co-produced by actors. At first glance John takes the chief executive's ideas and claims them as his own. A relational lens suggests that in the process of everyday conversations ('setting to work on John') the authorship and ownership of ideas becomes jointly assumed. Over time, this episode became the basis of an instructional story that the chief executive shares to illustrate the complexity of that officer-member relationship to aid others' learning.



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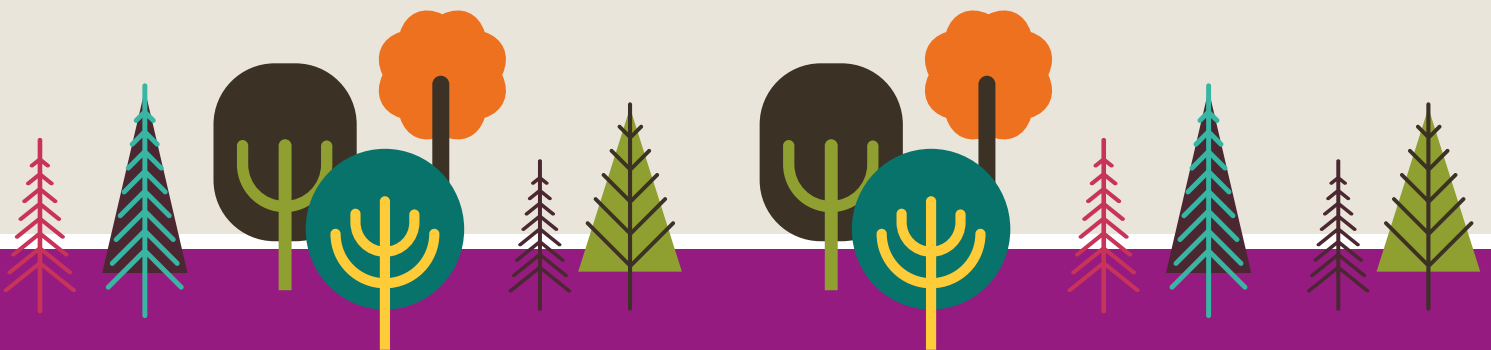
## 10.6 **What Do Senior Professional Leaders' Reflections Tell Us About This Practice?**

- 10.7** In managing relations with Mayors, Council Leaders and other senior politicians the importance of wider organisational narratives comes to the fore in the senior professional leaders' reflections. Chief executives and city managers emphasised the sensitivity of their role in relation to shaping narratives of change with local politicians. It is important that enabling the political storytelling is conducted behind the scenes, because of the need not to be seen to exceed their brief and encroach on the politicians' territory. Telling the story of the political journey must not usurp the role of the members. As one chief executive explains, "This is not something you want to be ostentatious about, but you're also 'doing the narrative' back to the politicians. When I arrived there was no habit of the chief executive going to political groups to talk about what the challenges were. And we've been doing a lot of that... and the focus is the narrative - getting them to realise where they are, where they've been, where they're going."
- 10.8** A chief executive told us: "So again, and sometimes with Council members, you have a fairly short, small window to impart a lot of information to them and sometimes storytelling is the way that you can get it through fairly quickly in a short timeframe."
- 10.9** Similarly another US city manager put it this way: ***"I use storytelling a great deal. You have various audiences that you're trying to communicate with, you are the pivot point between the administration, the staff and the elected officials, so you are in effect the chief policy advisor to the Mayor and Council. I found it's very effective to use stories to give examples to talk about your experiences in plain, simple terms, so that politicians understand the implications of their decisions."***
- 10.10** In these reflections we see a chief executive and a city manager talking about the importance and mechanics of influencing the political narrative. The process must be discreet, respectful and must take account of the political leader's experience and existing frame of reference. Communications with politicians are not peer-to-peer. It is rarely the same as a discussion between policy professionals. Politicians are representatives and often have strong ideological commitments. Communication has to be able to show what is important, to present evidence and advice in a range of forms, based on constant and imaginative communication. In the story above we hear how the chief executive goes to political group meetings, seeking to interpret and influence each narrative in parallel. They highlight the array of political narratives present. They identify the project as building a wider account of the organisation's direction, capacity and priorities. ***The account suggests how leadership is collective and emergent within the to-ing and fro-ing of organisational life. Political narratives are co-produced by a series of actors and networks in relation with each other.***

- 10.11** Some senior professional leaders characterised their role in policy development more actively offering accounts of political management in which they have a more explicitly influential voice. Such contributions articulated the role of officers in shaping political programs and the subsequent presentation of these. Here we see the role of the chief executive/city manager in ensuring coordination of the members. One chief executive explained the process in this way: ***“We constructed a narrative about becoming the ‘commissioning council’... as a means of delivering the members’ transformation stuff and... engendering order. It was chaotic... So we wrapped it all up into a coherent story and said to them, ‘Isn’t this what you’re saying to us?... Right then here’s a programme. Do you agree it?’ I think it is their story - we just needed to help them construct a narrative.”***
- 10.12** Whether the account of senior professional leaders’ role is more active or passive, what is common in these accounts is that chief executives and city managers emerge as co-authors, sounding boards, co-developers of strategy, challengers and co-interpreters of political vision. They could certainly be understood as professional leaders who are active in the political process, adding value to the democratic system, through the purposive use of narrative in relation to political guidance and policy leadership. One key to understanding the relationship is the formal boundaries between officers and elected members and how these roles are interpreted on an everyday basis. Professional leaders are not political appointees and therefore have a certain independence of any elected Leader, but in the end there is an employment relationship which can be ended at the will of the politician. The relationship between professional leader and politician is formal and each has distinct spheres of influence responsibilities. However, these complex relationships are interdependent, not binary, with elements of the roles often a matter of negotiation. Each jurisdiction typically has their own protocols; however, the relationships are not standardised, and depend greatly on personalities, cultures and competences.

# II. Theme 5:

## Developing and Learning



## II. Theme 5: Developing and Learning

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- 11.1** The final theme emerging from our research was the way in which stories enable effective learning and development. A core purpose is the transfer of knowledge, drawing parallels with past experiences in order to draw out lessons to be learned and the development of peers and colleagues. The senior professional leaders we spoke to had a treasure trove of these stories which they used with staff meetings, at conferences or in one-to-one conversations and mentoring sessions.
- 11.2** The first of these is an example of public service motivation told by a US city manager. It cherishes staff who went above and beyond any contractual commitment to a job in order to look after the true well being of a vulnerable person.

### ***Heart attack***

We had some firefighters who went out on an ambulance call to help a woman who was having what looked like a heart attack. When they arrived, they found that she was out on her lawn, which she had been mowing. They picked her up, took her to the hospital. On their way back to their station they stopped by her house, they finished mowing her lawn and put her lawnmower away.

We didn't learn about that because the firefighters told us. We learned about it because a neighbour saw it and wrote us a note to say 'wow, you people really give great service.' So when I talk, if I just say to employees, you're expected to provide great service, it's one thing. It's a lot more meaningful if I tell them that story.

- 11.3** This story exemplifies a notion of public service that leaves in its wake modern management control methods. There is no clocking on and off, no performance indicators, no reward seeking. The story provides a symbol to motivate and remind staff of the higher calling expected of those who serve.

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**11.4** The next story comes from a UK chief executive who takes a call from a senior government minister.

### ***Never off duty***

I remember one Sunday morning I was in the changing rooms, totally exhausted, after a morning on the bike with the club. Just out the shower and my mobile rang. It was Tony Craddock [senior government minister and local MP]. I answered, standing there, dripping wet. He told me what was on his mind... I spoke discreetly with him, as best I could, for a couple of minutes, assured him we'd deal with it.

There I was, butt naked, on the phone to the minister, surrounded by fifteen other guys from the club, from all walks of life, all getting changed and exchanging the usual banter. You've got to be ready for that kind of thing at any moment. This is the kind of organisation we are.

**11.5** Here we see the chief executive supposedly 'off duty' bonding with cycling friends surrounded by locker room chat and enjoying what they think will be some down time. Instead the story suggests how the chief executive is never out of contact and constantly available. This story which was often told to peers and to senior colleagues displays the expectations and the "always on" nature of the top job. It shows that politicians - local or national - will always expect a chief executive to be reachable, even when stripped, literally, of the day-to-day trappings of leadership. The story also communicates the idea of an organisation which is accountable, scrutinised at the highest political levels, and which is expected to be able to act to fix things. The chief executive is framing an understanding of organisational realities and preparing their successors – this is how it is.

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- 11.6** One of the ways in which senior professional leaders use stories to simplify complexity is to draw parallels with a more familiar context or environment. In this story we see a Canadian city manager telling a story to talk about conflict in the organisation and how they needed to work together to get through it.

### ***Mud fight***

When we were talking about team building in the organisation I find that change happens more readily if you can use imagery, and storytelling. Especially when we get to some tough parts in our team building process. For example, we did a reorganisation about five years ago. It was a process that had a lot of involvement from staff throughout the organisation, we all agreed on a structure.

We also agreed that change was going to be difficult and it would be upsetting for some because roles and responsibilities and where you showed up to work was going to change for some people. At one point during the change process it was a very dark moment; a lot of bickering, and the sense was growing that we shouldn't have done it, we shouldn't have gone forward with this, we should have just stayed with what we had. I think in any change period there is always that point where you question yourself. So we again turned to storytelling: a husband and a wife, going out on a Sunday drive through the bush in a pick-up truck, finding a mud puddle.

The couple discussed before they entered the mud puddle whether or not they're going to go through the mud puddle, they both agree they're going to go through. However, they get stuck and they start fighting. They're spinning the wheels, mud's flying. Using that sort of story I was able to have a conversation and ask, do we keep just fighting in the cab of the pick-up and spinning our wheels and spinning mud at each other or do we get out and get through the mud puddle and do it together?

Making that analogy to where we were in the organisation and that we had choices to make if we're going forward I think you can make your point but quickly in somewhat of a fun way. But also it's just more impactful than for myself, as City Manager, to stand up there and talk about team work per se and in just a very dry or factual manner. It's really about trying to tell a story so we all understand where we are in the process and visualise that and visualise what we need to do to get out of it.

- 11.7** Here we see the city manager telling a really simple story for which they draw a powerful conclusion. The story allows them to draw a parallel with a much less controversial set of circumstances and therefore present the consequences in stark terms. We have a choice to make. Do we stick together or do we tear each other apart? They also very clearly explain how stories can connect at a 'visual' level, using imagery and dramatic logic to present consequences and conclusion in ways that a traditional professional discourse cannot.
- 11.8** *What Do Senior Professional Leaders' Reflections Tell Us About This Practice?*
- 11.9** It has always been part of the effective leader's role to bring on and develop successors. Stories are particularly well suited to that process of development and play an important part in 'becoming' a manager. They enable busy people to cut to the chase, to share experiences and to transfer learning. One chief executive told us about the impact of stories they had heard from a more experienced mentor, "I remember, before I became a chief executive, hearing from a well-known figure about one thing in particular he'd done (a series of ward visits with councillors), and I did it when I took the new job ... it bought me months of credit. It wouldn't have worked if he had just expressed it conceptually, rather than as a story... it wouldn't have stuck, or had an impact." Again we see this chief executive explaining how they understood something more quickly and in a way which had led to practical actions, because of the form in which they had received the lesson. Had the point been shared as a conceptual lesson rather than a story, they say they would have taken longer to put it into practice.
- 11.10** Anyone who has been to a Solace, ICMA or CAMA conference will have observed chief executives and city managers telling stories to each other as a means of establishing their credentials, networking and building relationships. This happens over breakfast, during coffee, during business partner dinners and often late into the evening over a drink at the conference bar. Chief executives and city managers in local government come from many different backgrounds and their local or personal networks rarely overlap. We found that stories play a role in enabling senior professional leaders to communicate directly about issues of common interest.
- 11.11** One city manager told us, "the value of having the associations get together is networking and sharing experiences that you've had within your organisation with others, and using that experience to then go back and convey to your team, we're not alone in this. Others have either similar challenges or similar opportunities and we can learn from: here's an experience, or here's a story I heard from a peer."

- 11.12** Another city manager from Canada told us that networking and storytelling between senior professional leaders were so important because of the isolation of being the chief. ***“It’s lonely at the top. As a City Manager, you really have no-one within the organisation to share your experiences with or seek advice from or bounce ideas off. Professional organisations like CAMA and ICMA, provide that opportunity, and that’s exactly what occurs at conferences. I mean you get the content from the sessions but equally as important is the storytelling among City Managers, so they tell their stories, their situations and then you learn from that and then you can pass on your perspective or stories, or experiences that you’ve had. It’s an exceptional way of learning and getting good advice through this form of communication.”***
- 11.13** Chief executives and city managers being the high achieving and competitive people they are, stories can also become capital to trade by way of displaying competency and experience; establishing license to practice. The chief executives and city managers we spoke to volunteered examples which often contained the added frisson of competition. One chief described the practice as follows: “A little bit of preening, a little bit of one-upmanship, a little bit of establishing your credentials, a little bit of the unspoken ‘I’m fit to be in this company because I’ve also got a story I can trade’.”
- 11.14** Like most people at work, chief executives also trade stories about the people they work for. As one chief executive told us, “If you tell a Councillor Bloggs story when you’re sitting at the Solace conference you can bet somebody is going to try and trump it! Because their Councillor Bloggs is more of a lunatic than your Councillor Bloggs for sure! I mean the tale will get told in the best way but what we’re doing when we do that is we’re either letting off steam or we’re just trying to demonstrate that, you know, I’ve got a hard job back at the office because I’ve got these characters to live with just as much as you do.”
- 11.15** Storytelling techniques are not just something that managers pick up informally. One city manager told us how storytelling was central to their leadership development and succession planning within the council: “We had our leadership team on a panel with about a hundred of our high performer, high potential employees and we did a bit of a panel discussion that was really around telling the story of the careers of the leaders of the organisation, how they got to their position, what some of the things that they did to be successful. Storytelling is something that we understand is a very powerful tool. We have actually brought in, seminars and educational sessions around storytelling. It’s part of our curriculum for our leadership development so that they start to understand the power of storytelling and how they can use it in different ways to get important messages across.”



## 12. Research Findings and Implications for Practice

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In this section we provide an at-a-glance summary of the main learning points generated by the study. In Section 13 we elaborate on the implications that these findings have for how local government in the US, Canada and the UK approach the important task of leadership development.

1. Stories have a leadership purpose.
2. Stories can focus on dilemmas and show the consequences of different choices.
3. Stories can show a sequence of events and draw out the moral and practical significance of decisions.
4. Stories can reduce the distance between the narrator, the audience and the drama, bringing the listener to the heart of the action.
5. Stories can generate an emotional connection helpful to motivating and influencing staff.
6. Stories can talk about mission, identity and outcomes, cutting across professional and departmental boundaries and engage people with a shared sense of context and purpose.
7. Stories can help challenge and reframe the assumptions that underlie the practice of local government professionals.
8. Stories can be used to pass on knowledge and wisdom from past experience.
9. Stories can be a form of currency traded for credibility and status.
10. Attention to stories and narratives helps us understand leadership influence as collective and collaborative. Leadership is social, not heroic. It is accomplished through relationships and relies on influence.
11. Attention to stories can change their status as an inferior form of data. It propels us to regard them as important sources of knowledge, learning, and sensemaking.
12. Traditional understandings of leadership continue to influence leadership training, recruitment and practice. A re-conceptualisation of leadership as social implies a need for changes to leadership training, professional development and how leaders are hired. This point is worth discussing in depth and we do so in Section 13.
13. The idea of leadership as storytelling also raises ethical dilemmas. In an era of disinformation and debates about facts and truths, what is the status of our stories? What responsibilities do leaders carry as tellers of stories and how can we best approach these?
14. Remember: even if you are not getting your story out, others will be. Is being a good story teller an optional extra in public leadership?

## 13. Implications for leadership development

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- 13.1 Our study points to the need for a both a relational and a narrative turn in leadership development. It identifies the need for development and support initiatives that move beyond simply focusing on the individual, to engaging with individuals in context.
- 13.2 This involves eschewing classical ideas and images of heroic leaders as the basis for leadership formation. Instead it invites an appreciation of the relational aspects of the leadership role. In particular, leadership development approaches for public administrators need to explore the collaborative dimensions of the role.
- 13.3 This undertaking entails thinking about the political and pluralistic dimensions of public organisations. Strategies must enshrine emotionally intelligent approaches to interpersonal relations; a view of leadership which involves working across agencies, departments and systems; and the development of people who will offer collaborative leadership across professions and disciplines. An appreciation of these relational dynamics points towards an understanding that effective leaders embrace a different way of 'being' (in relation to others) as well as a different way of 'doing' leadership.
- 13.4 Classical skills such as 'scanning the strategic environment' cannot rely solely on a grasp of key facts as though the world is simply and rationally constructed. This strategic leadership task is re-cast as involving being alive to ideas, interpretations, histories, myths, stories, symbols, rituals and narratives that surround us and which create our context and frame our choices. In that light, making sense of change with and for others emerges as an important undertaking.
- 13.5 The goal of leadership development is to cultivate practitioners who engage others to mobilise collectively for the achievement of public good. Skilful leadership requires operating amidst polyphony and attending to the voices of the silenced or the marginalised.
- 13.6 Attention to the significance of stories and narratives in public organisations suggests the importance of developing skills in listening to the tales of others, as well as in crafting and telling purposeful stories. Leaders have an ethical duty to develop an ear for stories so as to better understand the truths of others.
- 13.7 Stories are a rich basis for a common identity, honouring colleagues and past struggles and achievements. ***Stories are also a powerful way of gathering people to imagine – together – compelling visions of a better future.***

## 14. Conclusion

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- 14.1 In this report we have examined the ways in which senior professional leaders in the UK and North America use narratives and stories to influence understanding and action in organisations. While there are significant differences between the roles and responsibilities of chief executives and city managers, we found that their attitudes to and use of storytelling were remarkably consistent. In this report we have focused on the general similarities rather than on any particular differences.
- 14.2 If hierarchies, structure charts and professional authority were symbols of twentieth century public services, storytelling is part of a 21st century shift. The way power is wielded is evolving. Hard power still matters of course, but soft forms of power are becoming increasingly influential. Power is slowly shape-shifting from bounded, law-based organisations to information-fuelled campaigns, or from “brawn to brains” (Naim, 2013). The ability to persuade, to move and to motivate is the leader’s most valuable asset.
- 14.3 Leadership – in public service, in government or anywhere else – is just as tough as it ever has been but the ways to wield influence in this transformed world are changing. At the same time trust and respect for professional managers and their expertise is in decline. Large-scale bureaucracy was designed to level social and economic differences. The predictability and regularity of rule-based decisions was intended to eliminate privilege and bolster equality and fairness before the law. Yet, bureaucracy has come to be criticised as an authoritarian apparatus that diminishes the freedom and responsibility of individuals and leads to moral impoverishment.
- 14.4 These arguments are very much alive in European and US politics public policy debates. This distrust of bureaucracy (elites, the establishment, and expertise; the feeling that organisations are rigged against the populations they are meant to serve and support), can be seen as another part of the zeitgeist and being part of what has driven recent political upheavals on both sides of the Atlantic (IpsosMori, 2017). Indeed the role of managers as disinterested experts and administrators has become more and more contested and bureaucracy’s standing has fallen so low that in the UK even a Bishop in the Church of England has characterised public service decision making as representing the patronising face of unaccountable power (Jones, 2017).
- 14.5 This is the context in which our research was undertaken and in which we find that senior professional leaders are developing their storytelling repertoire.
- 14.6 One overarching theme which emerges from the research is the way in which leaders use stories purposively to frame dilemmas and issues for themselves and others. Stories are a way of bringing to life, and of giving form to significant matters. Rather than conveying abstract information, stories present emotive and immediate connections.
- 14.7 Their immediacy could be likened to the difference between showing someone something, and telling someone about something. Stories ‘show,’ they represent, they bring the listener close to the action. They reduce the distance between the narrator, the audience and the drama. By contrast, when someone tells someone about something, they are in a different, more distant mode. They are reporting past events, or providing bird’s eye commentary in the third person. They are distant, not present.

- 14.8 Another difference between stories and formal reporting is the source of their power. While a report draws its authority from the expertise and credibility of the author and their sources, a story's power is drawn from the moral or emotional significance of the narrative and the extent to which it resonates with people. In a world where the authority of experts and leaders has declined, stories represent an alternative way of moving, motivating and persuading.
- 14.9 Our research explores a shift towards this paradigm. We show that many professional leaders find this way of achieving influence – 'showing through stories' - more effective than 'telling through authority'. These are both perfectly valid forms of communication and it is the 'telling through authority' which has traditionally been privileged in professional discourse. Storytelling is, however, a different form of managerial thinking. It is a different way of building and deploying the power of motivation and influence that has always been essential to leadership.
- 14.10 While senior professional leaders deploy both 'showing' and telling,' what is interesting is how many believe that showing through stories gives them purposive and powerful techniques – to lead, to move, to motivate, and to influence more effectively.
- 14.11 The stories we have curated illuminate how the everyday dilemmas of organising and leading are inescapably collective. The contemporary leadership challenge is social, not heroic. In this way, stories and narratives form the very stuff of public leadership.
- 14.12 While large, public organisations have always been a rich fund of colourful stories and powerful visions, storytelling has been largely absent from accounts of leadership in public management and leadership. Our focus highlights that chief executives and city managers are not in sole control over the discursive domain in which stories are told and narratives produced. [A multitude of stories and storytellers are at large at any one time \(Orr 2014\)](#). Storytelling is a social exercise in sense making and choice framing; it does not take place in the face of uncritical, passive recipients.
- 14.13 Our research highlights ways in which storytelling – and the broader idea of narrative - represents a significant part of their everyday leadership practices. In our study, stories emerge as a powerful and purposive medium with different angles and perspectives. Stories are ways in which leaders communicate, and provide a basis for receiving information and learning from others. Stories are a means for working with and through others, encouraging collaboration, developing the next generation, passing on knowledge and forging a common identity. Storytelling is a way of achieving influence, of moving, motivating and persuading others to take action in pursuit of the public good.

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# Storytellers in Chief

*How top local government managers  
use storytelling to lead*

Mike Bennett and Kevin Orr

