

Public Sector CEO and NED Breakfast - October 2009

Date

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Chair

Charlie Wagstaff, Founder & Managing Director, Criticaleye

Save for that which is gained from watching 'Yes Minister', many leaders do not have an inside view of the workings of Whitehall. Enlightening Members on the subject at this Criticaleye breakfast was Sir Brian Bender, former Permanent Secretary, who offered a presentation on working in government and with ministers.

For nearly ten years, Sir Brian was the chief civil servant of several government Departments. As Permanent Secretary, he led the creation of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), led the Business Department during the first part of the recession and oversaw the country through the Foot and Mouth outbreak in 2001.

Sir Brian started by describing his former role. In simple terms, the Permanent Secretary is the top manager of the Department, and is personally accountable to Parliament for the taxpayers' money. Success requires forming a partnership with the Minister (in nearly 10 years as a Permanent Secretary, Sir Brian worked with eight different Cabinet Ministers).

Leading in a crisis

Eight months after Sir Brian became Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the United Kingdom experienced its first outbreak of the Foot and Mouth Disease in 20 years. The outbreak lasted from February to September 2001, and for six weeks was the first item in the news almost every day.

The crisis taught him many lessons; most important to Sir Brian are how these outtakes can be applied in normal times:

Clarity of purpose This is usually evident in a crisis; how can leaders ensure similar clarity in 'peacetime'?

Dealing with pressure During a crisis there is a lot of pressure put on you and your staff. It's important for leaders to support those under pressure –

and know when to pass on pressure from the top, and when to absorb it oneself. It's important too to recognise the need to communicate well with other parts of the organisation (from which staff may have been reassigned to help deal with the crisis).

Rewards A large number of people who normally occupy 'hum-drum' jobs are put into extraordinary situations. How do you reward these people after the crisis?

Management information Know what information you are going to need to ensure that the proper decisions are taken. It is important too to have different sources of information as to what is happening on the front line.

Ensure lessons are learned How do you keep the learning alive?

Leading change

Prime Minister Blair's decision, after the 2001 general election, to merge the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food with parts of the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions to create DEFRA came as a surprise. Leading this unplanned merger (when the Foot and Mouth Disease crisis was still raging) was a major challenge.

Sir Brian also had experience of leading change when the DTI became the Department of Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform in 2007. He was also responsible for driving through greater efficiencies. In his time at the DTI headcount was reduced by 25 per cent in the two years to April 2006 and by a further 10 per cent in 2006/07.

Sir Brian provided his key take-aways from his experiences:

1. The importance (as noted above) of clarity of purpose
2. Ensuring that you have the right top team.
3. Investing time in leadership development and top team building
4. Confident leadership. Sir Brian had noted that leaders (at any level) who showed confidence tended to have high performing teams, while the leader who came across as a "victim" transmitted this culture to their people, and performance was usually poorer.
5. The importance of celebrating success (and building pride), as well as ensuring that lessons were learned when things had gone wrong.

Engaging with the 'opposition'

As the general election draws closer, many participants were interested in how public servants can engage with the opposition. Sir Brian explained that six months prior to the four-year mark after an election, it was customary for the Prime Minister to approve contacts between permanent secretaries and the opposition spokesperson.

As is expected there are protocols for such meetings. The Permanent Secretary is supposed to answer questions about the structure/role of the Department, but not to provide policy advice to the opposition. At a time (like now) when these contacts were likely to last up to 18 months, the Permanent Secretary had a difficult balance to strike (including not losing the trust of their current Minister).

Asked about 'quangos' Sir Brian recommended having contacts with the opposition (keeping the parent Department informed), being ready to engage and above all not coming across as defensive.

The impending election had many worried about the fate of top management at public sector organisations. Sir Brian commented that, after the 1997 election, most top public servants had remained in post, and many who had been close advisers to the Conservative Government thrived under the Labour Government (the current Cabinet Secretary, who had been John Major's Press Spokesman, being a case in point). The key, he said, was to be ready with plans to implement policies of whichever Government was elected – including how to make substantial savings in public expenditure.
