

## Lessons in Leadership:

Learning from 10 years at the top of the civil service

Former Permanent Secretary **Sir Brian Bender** spent 10 years at the top of the civil service. During this time he encountered all manner of challenge including leading the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food during the Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak of 2001. Here, in this Associate Profile, he shares his key lessons learned from 35 years working in government.

In my last few months in the civil service running up to my retirement in 2009, I reflected on what I had learned over 35 years, and particularly over the nearly 10 when I had been a Permanent Secretary (Head of Government Department).

I joined the civil service at 24, having done a PhD in Physics (when I was 21 I thought I might have a career in academia – but discovered that I wasn't really cut out for it). I joined the (then) Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), attracted by working in an economic department and by the variety of assignments people had. After four years, I went to Brussels (to the UK Permanent Representation to the EU), beginning a 20-year tenure at the centre of the UK's European policy-making. This culminated (in 1994-98) in being the Head of the Cabinet Office's European Secretariat and in effect the Prime Minister's European adviser, first to John Major and then Tony Blair – a fascinating time.

I became a Permanent Secretary in 1999, at the Cabinet Office, and from then to my retirement led four other departments (the then) Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Defra, DTI and Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR), working in that time with eight different Cabinet Ministers.

## LEADING IN A CRISIS

The 2001 Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak occurred eight months into my time at MAFF. It was a searing experience for all concerned. Although we didn't know it at the time, the day the disease was first discovered the virus was already on between 50 and 100 farms across several counties. The issue was number one on the news almost every day for six weeks, and the outbreak lasted seven months, involving enormous cost. The key leadership learning points I took away (applicable in 'peacetime' as well as crises) are:

**Clarity of purpose** In a crisis, the aim is usually clear. How can leaders ensure that such clarity exists in normal times?

### Dealing with staff under pressure

Know when to provide support, when to apply pressure or absorb pressure from the top yourself.

**What people can do** In major crises, people are often transferred from doing mundane tasks to extraordinary things. It's important to ensure this is rewarded and capitalised on during normal times.

**Internal communications** Always important, but particularly so when the organisation is in the eye of a media storm – including for those work areas not directly involved in the crisis (but who may be short-staffed because of the need to reinforce those dealing with the crisis).

**Management information** Ensure you know in advance, what management information will be needed to ensure the right actions.

**Learning the lessons** Have a plan to capture the lessons learned and that these are kept alive in the organisation.

## LEADING CHANGE

I am something of a veteran of 'machinery of Government' (ie, organisational) changes in Whitehall – for which there is usually no significant advance notice. I learned of the plan to merge environment policy, as well as rural policy, with agriculture to create Defra in June 2001 only a few hours before the public announcement (and the Foot and Mouth crisis was still raging). In 2007, I had a few days' notice of the changes involved in DTI becoming BERR; but only a few hours' notice in 2008 of Energy Policy leaving BERR to go into the new Department of Energy and Climate Change. In such cases, clear and prompt internal and external communications are vital, together with work on the (new) departmental strategy and priorities, and a determined change programme to ensure that staff members are equipped to deliver the new remit.

Three other points about leading change:

- Ensure that the make-up of the top team is right, and invest time in top team building and leadership development.
- Encourage confident leaders rather than 'victim' leaders.
- Celebrate success, to build pride and spread good practice and ensure lessons are learned when things go wrong.

THE NETWORK  
OF LEADERS

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## WORKING WITH MINISTERS

Leading a government department successfully requires a partnership between the Permanent Secretary and the Secretary of State – where each can speak frankly to one another in private. The other obvious (but easily forgotten) factor that comes into play when working with ministers is that they are each different, with their own strengths, preferences and dislikes, and the department needs to understand them if it is to operate effectively.

## LESSONS LEARNED

I had a fascinating career in the civil service, and felt privileged to be able to do some of the things I did (not least being asked to create a new department in 2001). We all learn from experience; in recent years, I have trusted my own instincts rather more than I did when I first became a Permanent Secretary.

## THE FUTURE?

The next few years will call for strong leadership in the public sector, driving efficiency, prioritising clearly and making savings without damage to key policies and services. More broadly, the challenges for our children will be substantial, in terms of the pace of change, the implications of technology, and some of the global challenges, such as climate change.

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