

Setting the good-work agenda

It's vital all in public office think ethics-first when it comes to organisational decision-making, says **Karen Grave**

So it's another case of *deja vu* as I start a PPMA supplement by saying 'I can't believe how quickly time has gone'. But, honestly, I really can't believe the year is almost over already.

This supplement will be published as Solace Summit is underway in Birmingham. I'm delighted to be supporting that in a discussion on ethics. Given where we are in our political discourse and climate, it feels right to remind ourselves that ethics is a really topical subject. Brexit has tested our politics – and the media's capacity for balanced journalism – to a degree we were clearly not prepared for.

While we've had periods of real social challenge before, and no doubt we will have them again, the worrywarts (or perhaps the middle aged) among us may question our future capacity to create an environment where we can robustly argue and debate, but still maintain a respect for one another.

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The red lights are clearly flashing across government. Sir Jonathan Evans, Chairman of the Committee for Standards in Public Life, published an open letter to all public office holders on 20th September reminding us all about the importance of how we behave. In reflecting on the political climate around Brexit, he notes that while our institutions are undertaking their roles in providing constitutional checks and balances, 'behaviour matters as much as formal structures'.

Those of us in HR and OD will be rolling our eyes – hopefully, at this point, at the blindingly obvious nature of this observation, and the one that came next: 'Leadership of standards needs to come from the top: from Government and from Parliament'.

This leadership issue is all-encompassing for our organisations. Standards, values and behaviour are the bedrock of our organisational

cultures. How we tend to, nurture and maintain our foundations doesn't just affect us now, it impacts our collective and individual futures.

Sir Jonathan ended this letter with the following: 'These long-established principles of selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership are a personal responsibility and set the tone for leadership across the whole of public service. They are what the public expect of us'.

I set out in the last supplement that we'd be looking at Future Workforce in this one and the principles of 'good work'. As a reminder, good work is:

- fairly rewarded;
- gives people the means to securely make a living;
- gives opportunities to develop skills and a career and ideally gives a sense of fulfilment;
- provides a supportive environment with constructive relationships;
- allows for work-life balance;
- is physically and mentally healthy;
- gives employees the voice and choice they need to shape their working lives;
- accessible to all.

Arguably, we should all be delivering good work now. But we know we aren't. How do we know that? In 2017, KPMG estimated that 5.5 million UK workers are paid below the foundation living wage. Poor absence rates, instances of bullying, patchy employee engagement and poor representation of minority groups in leadership roles are indicators we cannot ignore.

It seems to me, the seven Nolan principles go hand-in-hand with the good work agenda. You can make a relatively easy case that the characteristics of high-performing cultures align with them, and the role of leaders becomes even more important.

If leadership is so important – and I would always argue that it is – why have we chosen to focus on Future Workforce. There are a few reasons for me: internal and external drivers for change aren't slowing down – technology is exerting ever more pressure with the increasing use of



AI in processes and software; our ageing workforce is demanding that we think evermore creatively about attracting and retaining older workers; Brexit will present a clear and present opportunity for us to genuinely face and address an uncertain landscape, and so on.

We talk increasingly about local, places-based services needing to focus on those with complex multiple needs. But we don't hear that language being used in the context of how public service organisations reflect and adapt so that they can shape and respond to the future.

It's probably a conversation we should be having more for a number of reasons. I've been encouraged by amazing leaders who are proactively pushing what I call the values agenda. Talking to chief executives about Brené Brown, vulnerability, compassions, etc, no longer gets you filthy looks, which is a positive. But, ironically, it does feel as though, for

all the available work around good and effective leadership, the brilliant and visible leaders we automatically think about almost attract an alchemical/mystical aura.

The argument about nature and nurture is a long-standing one and I wrote many essays on this at Uni. Even if you took the view that good leaders are born, the reality is we can't afford to accept that – we just won't have enough of them. Being really clear about relationships between leadership, good work, the Nolan principles and our capacity to create, shape, guide, develop, nurture, and encourage future workforces that aspire, thrive and flourish is critical.

In this edition, you will be reading about PPMA member organisations who are looking to address aspects of the good work agenda. What characterises these organisations is they are clear on their relationships with their communities, they

understand that the now affects the future, they're not waiting for the future to happen to them and they know our organisations have complex, multiple needs.

It's an important agenda. And I'm delighted to say we will be further exploring this at the Annual Conference in March/April 2020. I'm also delighted to introduce Max McKeown to the community. Max will be a keynote speaker at Conference 2020. He has written for us on another important topic – crisis and how we can harness that to innovate.

We'll be announcing PPMHR20's theme on Tuesday 29th October. It's hugely exciting, so please keep an eye out on www.ppma.org.uk for more details.

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