

Q: What was the challenge?

In January 2003, the Board of the Government Office for the North East commissioned a Leadership Programme for staff and Board members. This decision was prompted by a number of factors, including the perception of a gap in leadership skills in the organisation; a sense of disconnection between the Government Office and the stakeholders they serve across the North East and an uncertainty over the future, as Central Government sought to devolve power to the Regions in new ways.

The challenges expressed by different people across the Government Office included:

- A traditional, hierarchical and bureaucratic culture that restricted empowerment and innovation
- A disconnection between the Board and others in the organisation – a sense of ‘them and us’
- A perception of a lack of leadership – within the Government Office and across the region
- External pressure to raise performance and provide greater value for money
- A need to be more flexible, open to change and able to respond to external changes
- Developing the Board as an effective leadership team
- Inspiring leadership across the Government Office, regional partners and stakeholder community to increase the collective visibility, momentum, and impact across the North East

Q: How did we work together?

An initial consultation with people across the Government Office sought to understand the key aspects for a bespoke leadership programme. The output of this consultation was ‘Leading to Excellence’ – a leadership programme involving a number of different strands over the course of the next two years.

The initial activity was the first Leading to Excellence programme:

- The programme was advertised across the Government Office and a diverse group of 30 Participants was selected. Each participant identified two Learning Partners to support their practical application of the learning and to broaden the impact of the investment
- The first programme ran over a period of one year, including 6 modules of 3 days each. The group developed skills in affirmatively disruptive leadership, including communication, questioning and conflict management. They shared feedback and applied their learning to their day-to-day work
- The culmination of the pilot programme was a Government Office-wide leadership development event, planned, designed and hosted by the Participants, to cascade their learning. Feedback demonstrated people were inspired by the leadership shown from the Participant group

The Board engaged in their own leadership programme in parallel with the pilot:

- The Board demonstrated commitment by dedicating two days a month to their own development
- The Board programme was linked to the Leading to Excellence pilot, both in content and by bringing members of the Board to work with Participants in the programme modules
- The Board supported the programme by identifying live and critical projects for Participants to address

The pilot created a significant appetite for Leading to Excellence 2. The second programme built on the success of the first, with a few key structural and strategic differences:

- The structure was streamlined to deliver the desired impact within 4 modules over 9 months
- Participants from the pilot programme were engaged to show their leadership, support the new participants and facilitate large events
- The leadership challenge for the programme was expanded. Whereas the first round of participants were challenged to make an impact within the Government Office, this group were required to take the new spirit of proactive leadership into the Region, engaging the Stakeholder network, challenging perceptions of the Government Office and making a significant impact in the North East

- The culmination of the second programme was a Stakeholder Open Day in Spring 2005. Hundreds of guests from diverse communities in the North East attended to learn about the services provided and opportunities created by the Government Office and to network with each other. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Guests left saying that the day had transformed their perceptions of the Government Office and looked forward to working more closely with them in the future

Q: Did the outcome meet expectations?

Leading to Excellence exceeded all expectations.

- There has been a wholesale shift in perceptions of leadership and individuals' responsibility and capability to make a difference in the Government Office and in the region
- Participants have demonstrated significant growth in skills and confidence in leading and motivating others, with widespread evidence of tangible actions taken by Participants
- A network of leaders has been established across the Government Office for the North East, collaborating across departments to deliver integrated interventions with increased impact
- There has been a shift in attitude about the Board, moving away from a culture of 'Them and us', to question 'How can we work together to get this done?'
- The Board are increasingly recognised as an effective and strategic decision-making team of leaders, raising the profile of the Government Office in the North East
- Leading to Excellence has had an impact on the majority of employees, even if they have not been formal participants on the programme. The new culture of proactive and engaging leadership has become a familiar part of how people work and communicate
- There has been a step change in the relationship between the Government Office and the community as perceptions of its role and capacity to deliver on behalf of the region have been transformed

Q: What did the Government Office learn from the relationship with Questions of Difference?

Headline lessons learned from Leading to Excellence include:

- When a leadership team is prepared to think beyond its current situation, clearly articulate its vision for the organisation and then engage people across the organisation to deliver it, amazing things can be achieved – both within the organisation itself and beyond
- Programmes to engage leadership need to be scoped and developed in a way that demonstrates trust in emerging leaders to achieve the greatest impact
- External facilitators can ask some of the 'unaskable' questions and challenge some of the accepted ways of thinking and working
- Even the apparently most cynical of individuals carry a passion inside them that can be uncovered when they are engaged and challenged in an affirmatively disruptive way
- The value of consistently asking the question 'How will you now practically apply this thinking' keeps leadership development practical, focused and relevant

It is also worth noting that the leadership programme was recognised by the ODPM Permanent Secretary and awarded a Delivery in Excellence Award.