

Supporting transformation
in public services,
in search of:

Trailblazers

“If you come across someone in public service who is cheerfully passionate about helping people, has demonstrated courage in the face of adversity, and is always looking to change things, then stop and think....you may just have found yourself a Trailblazer”

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This report identifies the factors that distinguish high performers in the public and not-for-profit sector. The research was carried out by talent consultancy Wickland Westcott, supported by Manchester Business School.

Background

Having worked extensively in the public sector, on both recruitment and talent development assignments, we had a hypothesis that the highest performers share some common characteristics. A research project was launched to put this to the test – to establish if there are commonalities, and if so, to identify what they are. The overall objectives were to deepen our understanding of talent, and to contribute to the debate around leadership in the public services.

Defining ‘Trailblazer’

We defined a Trailblazer as: *‘someone who is known to drive transformation in public services, whilst delivering results’.*

This definition captures the sense of dynamism that Trailblazers bring, combined with the absolute necessity to ensure transformations are grounded, and yield tangible benefits within reasonable timeframes.

Research method

Participants completed a personality questionnaire, and were then interviewed in depth to explore key career events and seminal moments, their personality features, their aspirations, and their points of difference with those around them. Potential research participants were generated through three sources: 1) people known to Wickland Westcott’s public sector head-hunters, 2) people recommended by commentators in relevant organisations and public bodies (eg strategic health authorities, regional co-ordinating bodies), and 3) people identified through desk-based study of the media and relevant publications.

This generated a pool of approximately 90 contenders from whom 30 were selected as fully meeting the criteria of a Trailblazer. This final sample contained individuals drawn from local government, regional and central government, education, health, the emergency services and the voluntary sector.

The data from these 30 participants was subjected to thematic analysis by a three-person team of Wickland Westcott consultants, led by a Chartered Occupational Psychologist. We started with no pre-conceptions about what themes might emerge. Detailed below are the key findings. It should not be assumed that every theme applies to every participant in the study. Further, the public sector is not a homogenous entity – there are distinct differences in governance, locus of policy control and culture across services and locations. That said, researchers were surprised by the clarity and commonality of the trends that were found.

The Career History of Trailblazers

- **Clear sense of vocation** - they have a tangible desire to help others and make a difference to people's lives: "*This community deserves excellence, and they will get it*".
- **Early life experiences** - a challenging early life (eg illness, parental death, poverty) seems to have triggered an energy, self-sufficiency, and sense of mission.
- **Diffuse career paths** - limited career planning, much greater evidence of seizing opportunities, following interests, moving sideways if necessary: "*I volunteered to take over as it was a gaping hole that needed filling urgently*".
- **Mentoring** - early exposure to senior role-models provides belief and inspiration that energises young Trailblazers. Where role-models have been negative, the focus has been upon taking learning from these experiences: "*I made my mind up never to let anyone treat me like that again*".
- **Appetite for responsibility** - putting themselves in harm's way, shouldering significant challenges, taking a chance, being willing to lead on something that might not work.
- **Overcoming obstacles** - most Trailblazers report periods in which they faced career setbacks, and were doubted by others. This seems to have galvanised them, and caused them to dig deeper.

Recruiters often talk of candidates having a classic marketing background or a classic retail background. There is no classic background for a Trailblazer. Look for a burning sense of vocation. Look for people who have acted in line with their values, when it might have been easier (or more beneficial to themselves) to do otherwise. Other indicators are success in overcoming adversity, a desire to seek learning from all situations, and a willingness to back themselves. Trailblazers have been the underdog, and that spirit has stayed with them.

Characteristics of Trailblazers

- **Hard driving** - this may sound obvious, but we believe Trailblazers work harder (ie longer hours, invest more discretionary effort) than others. And they have tangible drive: "*My ambition is for us to be No1 in the UK for the top 10 things that are most important for our communities – and we will be!*"
- **Low rule-following** - they are unlikely to comply with process, and as long as their values are not compromised, they believe the end justifies the means: "*I know the limits – always pay my speeding fines and parking tickets – but I will push hard to find ways to get things done by stretching the rules*".

- **Optimism** - they look to the upside, expect things to turn out for the best, and try to keep a smile on their faces. *“If I fall in a bear trap, who knows, I might meet a friendly bear”*. This brings with it above-average levels of tenacity and persistence.
- **Trusting** - their optimism extends to their dealings with people – they give others the benefit of the doubt, demonstrating a fundamental belief in empowerment. They really value people: *“I’m so fortunate to be surrounded by such gifted colleagues”*. But they also practice tough love, and will proactively challenge underperformance.
- **Local place-shaping** - they have a vision for their authority/borough/service and work in partnership with other agencies to realise this. They focus on the future, think ahead and see the bigger picture. They avoid getting too close to the detail, preferring to leave this for others to deal with. In this regard they might be seen as a little picky – working on the exciting stuff themselves, leaving the mundane to others.
- **Seek to understand people** - Trailblazers think about other people, what makes them tick, what motivates them, their likely hopes and fears. They then use this constructively, as a platform for influence: *“In council meetings I spend more time watching Members’ faces than listening to debates”*.
- **Innovation** - they are typically unconventional, and unconstrained by established practices. They like variety. If they can see a better way, they will do it. There is a creative dissatisfaction at the core of their being.
- **Taking charge** - they are consultative, but only up to a point: *“If you do everything by consensus, things grind to a halt”*. More typically they take charge, favouring action and rapid decisions over lengthy deliberation.
- **Imposter syndrome** - Any resentment caused by their pickiness is diffused by their humility: *“I conduct an orchestra – though I can’t play anything myself”*. Trailblazers do not believe they do anything special. They attribute their success to a good portion of luck, and expect they will get ‘found out’ one day soon.

Trailblazers have a powerful vision for what they want to achieve. They mobilise and align resources behind over-arching objectives, and refuse to be diverted or demoralised by opposition or bureaucracy. We may be seeing a new model emerging, where success in public services demands the ability to grapple with complexity, prioritise ruthlessly, and innovate constantly in order to cut a path through the jungle of inertia created by the democratic context. The multiple stakeholders and competing demands within public service are there for good reason, but can serve to slow things down. Trailblazers find a way through.

Trailblazers vs other Public Sector Employees

Wickland Westcott has developed a proprietary database of over 1,000 executives previously assessed for recruitment and development purposes. In this section we compare Trailblazers with other Public Sector employees on a range of competencies.

Trailblazers stand out from other public sector employees in four specific areas:

- **Leadership** - direction setting, gaining commitment, people development, delegation. *"I love creating great teams – making others great".*
- **Strategic Thinking** - vision, global perspective, organisational awareness. *"I back my own judgement but rely heavily on the skills of others in advising me on the detail".*
- **Managing Change** - initiating change, driving change, overcoming resistance. *"I've been rapped over the knuckles for not going through due processes – but it worked".*
- **Motivation** - initiative, energy, resilience, accountability, goal focus. *"In my early days I had a real reputation for toughness".*

Across other areas there is little difference between Trailblazers and other public sector employees, suggesting that it is the Trailblazers' ability to really leverage the above four competencies that differentiates them. Most of all there is a clear sense of movement – Trailblazers achieve progress, they make change happen – where others, despite the best of intentions, become marooned.

Trailblazers vs the Private Sector Stars

There is much debate about the differences between public and private sector employees. What are these differences? Are the skills transferable? Some commentators even ask 'Who is best?' We investigated how Trailblazers stack up against the cream of private sector talent. Again using our proprietary benchmark database, we compared the Trailblazers with private sector executives judged to be the best in breed.

The themes here are subtle, suggesting high performers across both sectors have much more in common than they have in difference. However, the following observations were made.

Typically, in direct comparison, the Private Sector Stars were stronger in the areas of *Analysis and Decision Making, Commercial Appreciation, Communication and Implementation.*

The Trailblazers, in direct comparison, were stronger in the areas of *Leadership, Managing Change, Strategic Thinking and Teamwork.*

These findings hint at private sector strength in rational economic analysis, and in making things happen effectively and efficiently. They hint at public sector strength in driving transformational success through direction setting, engagement and inclusion. As one Trailblazer commented: *"I tend to have a clear line of sight"*.

Conclusion

The study suggests that there are distinct characteristics that distinguish the people most likely to succeed in the public and not-for-profit sector. This has significant relevance for those engaged in recruiting, developing and managing such talent.

Further research, particularly within sub-sets of our sample population (health, education, local government, the emergency services and so on) would likely tease out other interesting themes, and would help refine our understanding of this critical area. Manchester Business School will continue its involvement and take the work forward into its own programme of leadership research. This covers themes within and beyond the public sector, such as creativity and the public service ethos.

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