



Target Practice and Blind Faith:

What's going wrong (and right) in Local Government Performance and Partnership Management?

Executive Summary

In 2007, we launched a research project to identify what is working and what isn't in council performance and partnership management- and to give authorities clear objective feedback to fuel their action planning to improve. At its heart, the research scrutinizes how local government uses communication as a strategic tool to improve performance both inside an authority and when it is working in partnerships with others. The timing could not have been more relevant. Over the next three years, local authorities face the challenge of moving from CPA to new local area agreements and comprehensive area assessments. More than ever before, there will be an emphasis on how services are delivered in partnership.

We focused our scrutiny on the current strengths and development needs of councils in England in terms of how they used communication to:

- create a shared understanding of purpose
- form good two way management information flows
- improve how people work together
- raise performance management competencies.

We then went on to see what happens when an authority works in partnership with others, exploring the issues of how the partners use communication to:

- share objectives
- keep each other informed
- build strong and open relationships
- exercise leadership

All too often, the CPA rating is the only 'indicator' used to assess council performance. We wanted to probe a bit deeper into specific skills, behaviours and attitudes, and discover what people think about their own performance on these matters. And we wanted honest feedback, not the sort of 'group think' that can emerge when staff get together and talk in the presence of their managers. This necessitated a totally confidential and anonymous approach.

We gathered our data from nearly 400 respondents in 15 authorities in England, most of which were district or boroughs. We included 2 unitary councils and one county council to see if the size and shape of an authority made a significant difference to the scoring. The data was collected through index360©, an online survey process of facilitating confidential feedback which leads to action planning to improve performance. It has a number of attributes that make it especially suited for this sort of research, including the ability to set benchmarks both within and between teams and different organisations. Based on 68 statements of best practice, our research revealed some important evidence about council performance and partnership management.

Key conclusions

CPA's "target practice" mentality may prove a mixed blessing. Most council staff are generally positive about performance management. Analysis of staff perceptions shows that the "target practice" required by CPA has helped when it comes to objectives, team targets, vision and strategy. Many of the processes of monitoring, reporting, and team meetings are clearly working well. Of course, there are variations between different councils, but in general, this should prove to be a useful legacy going forward. If councils stop here, however, then they will have difficulties with the transformation agenda, because the research also shows disturbing weaknesses when it comes to innovation.

We have a long way to go to build a learning culture. Our research shows a worrying disconnect between the CPA "target practice" and an approach that actually embeds improvement and innovation, based on questioning and feedback processes. Many staff do not believe that their council talks about and learns from its mistakes. There are clear development needs, many of which relate to building a learning culture. Questioning working methods and giving better feedback on performance (especially poor performance) are integral to the innovating mentality which lies at the heart of the coming post CPA transformation agenda.

Working together requires real 2-way communication. Council top teams may be getting more skilled at listening, but meeting the reporting demands of CPA can be seen by staff as the greater priority. More work needs to be done to get the message back to staff in a way they can understand and take action on to improve. Team meetings are not enough; our research shows that staff are not feeling satisfied with the feedback that they get. In many councils there is a lack of trust in senior management communication, a belief that council communication is not as open and honest as it should be. Even in the best performing councils staff see management failures to communicate decisions and changes clearly, and many feel that their council is not treating them equitably or fairly.

The best communication channels are your own people. Despite the resources spent on e Gov, it is clear that staff are not very happy either with intranets or the public websites. To get your strategy across to the public is not easy, and it is made worse if you don't take full advantage of your own employees. You can't expect your staff to be effective on your behalf, however, if they don't trust what senior management says and if they don't feel well enough informed about decisions and changes that affect them. Our research shows real evidence of why "one way" push communication to staff is not working. It also demonstrates that most authorities are not using elected members as an effective communication channel to the public. No wonder then that staff don't feel that the Council strategy is understood by the public.

Blind faith in partnerships contrasts uncomfortably with a lack of trust in one's partners. Councils carrying weaknesses in their performance management communication are likely to find these exacerbated when working in partnerships. Few authorities question the idea of partnership working, so few, that it has become seen as "a good thing" in its own right. But many fail to set clear and challenging objectives or measure delivery of them. Blind faith in partnerships isn't being backed up by enough real evidence. In nearly half of the participating authorities staff have low confidence that partnerships are actually improving the way things are done. Before they can address these weaknesses, however, there is an even greater obstacle that must be overcome first. Despite their 'blind faith' that partnerships are a good thing in principle, many respondents believe that partners have hidden agendas.

Growing and developing partnerships needs more than just information exchange. A number of the target practice achievements of the CPA era would appear not to have been carried over into partnership working. Staff in many councils have doubts about whether their authority is setting clear objectives and evaluating how partnerships are working. Information flows are partly to blame; too many staff believe it is **not** easy to find out what is going on in partnerships. Of course, if clear objectives are not set at the start, then councils can fall into the trap of exchanging information for information's sake, only reinforcing the view that partnerships are just talking shops that focus on short term objectives at the expense of longer term plans. The lack of a learning culture inside authorities is replicated- even exacerbated- when working in partnerships. Agreed clear objectives and regularly monitoring might help, but if this is not shared in order to grow and develop the partnerships, then it may be merely going through the motions of information exchange.

We must work harder to build relationships of trust between partners. Exchanging information is mechanical and therefore easy enough to do, but evaluating relationships is much harder because one has to define what good looks like first. These are issues fundamental to good governance of partnerships and are almost certain to be addressed by those assessing comprehensive area agreements. Perhaps the strongest message from the research was that staff believe that partnerships are hampered by hidden agendas and a lack of mutual trust. While not true for all participating authorities, even those councils that did well overall in the partnership areas registered their lowest scores in this area. Risk management of partnerships requires transparency and openness, and a real commitment to showing improvement over time. Without trust, this will be difficult to achieve.

Leading partnerships is challenging when accountability is not evenly shared between partners. In the post CPA era, when two tier working relationships will become more common, and councils will be forced to work more with each other, conflicts can arise as to who assumes the role of leader. This can become even more difficult when other public bodies and agencies are involved. For example, some participating authorities' relationships with PCTS and other health bodies became seriously strained by resource cuts and "issue dumping" where the councils were left to pick up the pieces. Council reputations are at risk when they are the only partner which can be held democratically accountable. In the lead or not, when partnerships are seen to have failed, the buck stops with the council. This is because councillors are usually the only people that the public can punish by voting. Elected members can be wary of partnerships for this reason.

Recommendations on performance management:

The sophisticated and data rich results provided by index360© surveys allow councils to learn much about best (and worst) practice between different teams, and to encourage a learning culture that is key to raising performance throughout an organisation- and with partnerships. Of course, only time will tell if the organisations involved take these lessons to heart. The results provide ammunition to those willing to challenge the "blind faith" and "target practice" fixations, to develop a learning culture and to provide as much coaching as their teams need. A lot of action can be taken that is "home-grown" and costs nothing other than management time and leadership, such as blueprinting best practice and using the results of surveys like this to focus efforts where they will deliver the biggest improvements.

Other activities could benefit from an investment in external expertise: objectively auditing a council's websites, taking a fresh look at how a council's communications

meet the plain English needs of staff and councillors as well as the public, and helping top management teams embed a learning culture, for example. Yet, by using the sort of survey techniques we used, it is possible to direct resources only at those places in a council that need it the most. This does not involve significant costs compared with authority-wide training and management development programmes that many councils are now rolling out. The research approach allows interventions to be focused, short and cost effective. Above all else, coaching the authority's top team will help to develop the skills that are needed to make improvement self sustaining.

Recommendations on partnership management:

Exposing the hidden agendas, the lack of trust and the failure to set challenging but achievable objectives is a delicate business. It's not like leadership inside a council; it's not a matter of telling people what they should do. In partnerships, one has to gain consensus that it is the right way to proceed. Only then can they take collective responsibility for solutions. A facilitated process based on a confidential feedback mechanism like index360© moves the discussion beyond the "blame game" onto action planning.

To keep the research focused, we sought confidential feedback from only Council officers engaged in partnerships, so the obvious next step for the participating authorities is to find out what their partners on the other side think. Once everyone has been given the opportunity for confidential feedback, it is possible to build a shared action plan to improve. At the very start, exposing all parties to the statements of best practice can help partnerships to understand "what good looks like" and to raise their game. Partnerships lacking ambition are just as likely to be criticized in the CAA world as overly ambitious partnerships

Consistency in partnership communication is also key. A common approach applied across ALL of an authority's partnerships will enhance transparency, improve governance and scrutiny and reduce risks. Councils need to agree on such a model and work together to deliver it, too.

Next Steps

As we move to the post CPA period, councils have a short window of opportunity to get the core elements of partnership right.

If councils and partners do **not** have a shared set of clear objectives, if they continue to harbour hidden agendas and do not trust one another, then the chances of partnerships working successfully must be in jeopardy- if not immediately, then certainly over time. Inspectors will be looking not only at current performance but also at the risks of failure that will become higher as partnerships take on more of a central role. We do have some breathing space- a window of opportunity. For some authorities partnerships may be little more than talking shops and weaknesses may be less worrying. But, in the coming era of Comprehensive Area Assessments, this is no longer likely to be an option.

This isn't an 'academic' exercise. We are interested not only in the current findings about how councils perceive their own performance and partnership working but also in how they will use the feedback and results of this research, taking action to improve performance and partnership management. Consequently, we aim to repeat the research in the future to see what changes in performance have taken place. In this way, we can see how authorities use feedback to plan action and deliver improvements. The aim is to build up an increasingly detailed record of performance

over time. This will provide a summary benchmark against which other authorities using the index360© surveys can measure their performance.

The majority of the participating authorities were drawn from the ranks of districts and borough councils. We purposefully excluded authorities in Scotland and Wales, and included only one county council to see if there were significant enough differences in scale and approach to warrant a tailor made exercise. We are now investigating with these groups the possibility of a dedicated research process that will meet their needs. With such extensions we intend to enrich the database of performance and partnership management, and build toward nationally representative benchmarks.

If you would like further information about the full research report, please contact Catherine Sweet at catherinesweet@btinternet.com or Valerie Heritage at val@index360.com .

Notes:

1. The 15 participating authorities were: Basildon DC; Dacorum DC, East Staffordshire DC, Kings Lynn & West Norfolk BC, Mid Beds DC, North East Lincs Council, North Kesteven DC, Nuneaton & Bedworth BC, Somerset County Council, Southend on Sea BC, South Ribble BC, South Tyneside MBC, Surrey Heath BC, Staffordshire Moorlands DC, Wellingborough BC. We are also grateful to Walsall BC for agreeing to be the pilot study for the research.

2. index360© surveys form the backbone of the research. Without the support of **Valerie Heritage** MD of The Communication Challenge Ltd, whose willingness to discount the normal cost of running the surveys in the interest of furthering council improvement, this research would not have been possible.

3. **Catherine Sweet** was the originator of the research idea, project co-ordinator and the author of the final report. A former director of the LGA, she now runs her own consultancy called 4C-S specialising in coaching and communication for strategic change in local government. She also assisted the team of four consultants who worked with councils to deliver the research: **Rachel Coventry** of Naked Eye Communications Ltd, **Adrian Longden** of Local Progress Consulting Ltd and **Gwen Booth** of Eventum Coaching and Change Ltd, and **Kate Pinder** of pi:affirm. Each is a SOLACE Enterprises Associate and an Accredited Index360© user. Their contact details are as follows-

	E mail	tel
Catherine Sweet	catherinesweet@btinternet.com	01264 720550
Rachel Coventry	rachel@n-e.org.uk	01252 612000
Adrian Longden	adrian@localprogressconsulting.co.uk	01245 604986
Gwen Booth	gwenbooth@eventumcc.co.uk	07900 987162
Kate Pinder	kate@piaffirm.fsnet.co.uk	0114 2589396

We would also like to acknowledge the support of **SOLACE Enterprises** and Rita Sammons in particular, and her keen interest in encouraging council best practice in partnership working. Take a look at www.solaceenterprises.com to see how they help councils improve their partnership working.