

# A career in the Big Society

**David Fielding**, lead Director for attenti's not for profit executive search and selection practice, sets out what aspiring directors and chief executives need to be thinking about if they are considering a future career within the Big Society

Despite the best efforts of many over the past 20 years, the movement of senior leaders between the public and private sectors has been pretty non-existent. We've all seen a few notable successes but the barriers and the perceptions of the skills gaps remain firmly in place.

The one main exception in the past has been social care, where we continue to see movement between local and central government, the not for profit sector, health and the private sector. But with the realisation of the Big Society things may be about to change.

In the wake of the spending review and the prospect of radical transformation of public services, aspiring directors and chief executives are rightly giving serious thought to what the future holds for them personally; and how they can best equip themselves for this brave new Big Society.

Given the emphasis the Coalition Government is placing on the Big Society, the concept of a small core of officers focusing on commissioning, contract compliance and supporting the democratic process whilst everything else is open to competition and market forces seems a very real prospect.

Moving beyond the rhetoric of street parties and neighbours cutting each other's hedges, the Big Society will comprise a slightly chaotic and very fluid cross section of social enterprises, private sector contractors, mutuals, co-operatives, and small, medium and large national charities.

The likes of SCOPE, the National Autistic Society and Action for Children will continue to thrive because of their ability to provide cost effective, high calibre local services within a national framework at the same time as being able to campaign and remain close to their beneficiaries.

Equally the likes of Thames Reach, a pioneering homeless charity where a third of its staff were once homeless; and St Giles Trust which helps to rehabilitate ex-offenders, producing outcomes the state could only dream about, seem to be in the right place at the right time. Let's not forget the social enterprises, mutuals and private sector providers who are gearing up to seize the initiative.

Private sector providers and social enterprises will be looking for people who can win work, maintain relationships, forge partnerships and provide professional expertise. Within the wider not for profit sector the ability to manage with less, to innovate, to win work, to offer a wide range of skills, to campaign and engage and enthuse volunteers will be key.

So given this very real future, what will give you the edge



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and make you more employable? As well as being one of the leading resourcing companies with local government and health, attenti has a thriving not for profit practice. We work very closely with acevo (Association of Charity Chief Executives) and many of the prime movers within the Big Society are our clients.

There is great consistency in what they seek in their directors and chief executives. Beyond the obvious; professional expertise, personal integrity, a values set aligned to the organisation, successful track record and breadth of experience, the key headlines have to be mobility, commerciality and adaptability. So far so good, but what will you really need to thrive and survive in the future?

#### ● Emotional Intelligence

Irrespective of your political persuasion, Gordon Brown

was probably one of the best examples of somebody who had little EQ and was unable to engage, empathise and rise above the emotional roller coaster of leadership.

#### ● Fluidity of style

The old adage, you can't play golf with just one club. So knowing when to adopt different approaches, to be directive, consultative, consensual or delegative. A real skill in a new world where one minute you may well be pushing a policy line with a Minister and their special advisors; and the next spending a long evening with a large group of volunteers.

#### ● Entrepreneurial zeal

A much harder concept to define but this is about the ability to sell and thrive on the excitement that comes with working to secure a deal. The need to be thinking constantly about where that new income stream will come from and what the margins are on every line of your business model. This is something that doesn't always come naturally to leaders within the public sector particularly when you have such strong financial support and operate within relatively steady annual budgets but is a must for the future.

#### ● Breadth of skills

Working in such a fluid environment will require you turning your hand to everything. The classic jack of all trades and master of none is probably about right. Rigid hierarchies and silo mentality have continued to get in the way. Leaders who have had success running different functions and different organisations have a head start in this.

#### ● Oomph and self sufficiency

The ability to be genuinely passionate, committed, persuasive and outraged at a social injustice, all come into play here. To inspire funders, donors, philanthropists, staff and volunteers you need to believe. Beyond that self sufficiency is key. Managing your own diary, booking your own travel, pulling together a business case overnight with numbers and words and producing a decent presentation or a speech at a minute's notice comes with the territory.

The good news is that despite where you are and what you are doing, it is never too late to develop, grow and make a transition. To find out more about how attenti can help you prepare for such a transition contact [careertransition@tribalresourcing.com](mailto:careertransition@tribalresourcing.com) or

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