

June 2007

**Leadership: Lessons for the Cultural Sector** was the fourth of the Clore Leadership Programme's annual conferences. Held at the British Library, the audience included Clore Fellows from the 2004/5, 2005/6 and 2006/7 programmes, the newly-selected 2007/8 Fellows, attendees of seven Clore Leadership Programme short courses and representatives from across the UK cultural sector.

The broad theme of the conference was lessons in leadership for the cultural sector: drawn from both within and beyond the sector. Three keynote speeches by Baroness Helena Kennedy QC, Lord Hollick and Peter Gilroy OBE drew on the speakers' respective careers in law, finance and media, and the public sector, as well as their roles as cultural leaders. Baroness Kennedy is a former Chair of the British Council and NESTA, and currently Chair of Arts & Business; Lord Hollick is a Partner of KKR, and Chair of the South Bank Centre; and, as Chief Executive of Kent County Council, Peter Gilroy has been instrumental in the successful development of creative industries in the county. In the second part of the morning a panel discussion explored leadership within the cultural sector: the speakers were Lynne Brindley, Chief Executive of the British Library, Christina Coker OBE, Chief Executive of Youth Music and Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum. The conference was chaired by the Rt Hon Lord Smith of Finsbury, Director of the Clore Leadership Programme.

One of the central questions for the Clore Leadership Programme is whether cultural leadership is different from leadership in other sectors, a theme addressed by all the speakers. What emerges is that leadership practices and the attributes of good leaders are largely shared across different sectors, but that cultural leaders face certain specific challenges. A second theme in the conference was the possibility for reciprocal learning between the cultural and other sectors, particularly as the cultural sector becomes more entrepreneurial: the lessons in leadership are not one-way.

### **On leadership**

What makes a good leader? There was considerable common ground between speakers on this theme. Leadership is seen as a set of behaviours that can be learned, through teaching, example and experience. Leadership is not bestowed by a title, but by its practice; leaders do not preside over an organisation, they give it a sense of direction and drive change. Leadership can perhaps be most easily recognised by its absence, Lynne Brindley argued, but speakers were nonetheless largely in agreement on the personal qualities required of a good leader: passion, courage, dynamism, energy, good judgement, the ability to inspire confidence and trust. Leaders need a willingness to take risks and to admit and to learn from failure; and to take unpopular decisions, with the ability to ignore the background noise+of dissent, as Peter Gilroy described it. Good leaders demonstrate personal integrity and are clear about their own core values . and how far they are prepared to be pushed. Leaders also need self-awareness, particularly of areas where they lack skills or experience, and the willingness to ask others to step in.

is a sense of vision, although Neil MacGregor suggests personal (or religious) rather than described the need for a leader to know why you are there, to have a clear purpose in leading an organisation: Lord Hollick cited Attila the Hun, whose leadership methods were perhaps a little extreme, but who had a clear goal to unite the fractured and warring Germanic tribes into a single nation to stand against Rome<sup>1</sup>. Good leaders define and communicate a powerful idea of organisational purpose and direction, establish a shared language and culture dedicated to that purpose, and ensure a sense of dynamism and urgency in achieving it.

Good leaders are not heroic leaders, or solitary figures but work collectively and with others. Baroness Kennedy described a shift in thinking about leadership from the `transactional` an approach based on hierarchy, threat and reward, to the `transformational` in which the leader inspires commitment to a common purpose and goal, and entrusts staff with a greater level of autonomy. Peter Gilroy argued for the importance of a devolved environment, giving responsibility to front line staff, and investing significantly in staff development and training.

Peter Gilroy's focus on people extends beyond his organisation: he described his own obsession with the customer, or public, and his habit of a weekly mystery shopping of council services in Kent. Leaders should ask themselves if they would use their own service; are they a customer in this theatre or here on sufferance? He argues for a deep engagement in every aspect of the organisation, most importantly at the point of encounter with its public.

## Leading cultural organisations

Although leaders in the cultural sector share many of the same attributes and practices of leaders in other sectors, they face some specific challenges. Lynne Brindley and Baroness Kennedy spoke of the complexity of cultural organisations: Kennedy compared the British Council's world-wide operations to a FTSE 100 company; Brindley described the need for chameleon-like leadership of an organisation that is at once a world-class research institute, a gallery, a centre for business and innovation, and a growing digital enterprise. Cultural organisations employ highly creative, committed staff. curators, for instance. for whom leadership needs to harness their individual passions and interests to a common corporate purpose.

Cultural organisations are also highly complex in their range of stakeholders and partnerships: we are accountable to government, audiences and users, business, education, funders and the media. Change and development of cultural organisations takes place in the public eye. Lord Hollick, a partner in the private equity house Kohlberg Kravis Roberts, contrasted this public scrutiny with the advantage afforded to firms taken into private equity, which undergo intense processes of self-examination and development in relative privacy. Hollick argues that the key to achieving profound change while remaining in the public eye is to communicate its purpose.

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<sup>1</sup> as outlined in Wess Roberts's *The Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun*, Warner Books 1989

...or gave two different perspectives on the ...ns. Youth Music's mission is to support music ... particular those with least opportunity; Coker describes this emphasis on equality and diversity as %written through the organisation+and informing its artistic practice, its partnerships, its staffing and organisational development. The hard-to-reach young people the organisation aims to work with %must not be let down+. For the British Museum, its collection held in trust for the public since its foundation in the eighteenth century, accountability is still more complex: as Neil MacGregor says, %most of the owners of the collection are not yet born.+Both the British Museum and the British Library hold collections drawn from across the world, and both institutions frame their responsibilities in a global and not just a British context.

### **New challenges for the cultural sector**

Two questions from the audience highlighted the complexities of that context. One asked about the responsibility of a national organisation to the regions and nations of Britain; a second how the cultural sector can contribute to the evolving debate about national identities. Neil MacGregor argued that devolution in the past decade has led to a cultural dismantling of the UK, and while the British Museum works with partners across the UK there is no longer a UK-wide structure to facilitate that process. The panellists shared the view that culture has a critical role to play in exploring identity. For MacGregor, the contemporary questions of national, religious, overlapping identities are the %difficult questions+ which the British Museum was set up to explore. His role as director is to address and realise that founding principle in the globalised context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Youth Music is both a national and a regional organisation, and the diversity of music making it supports reflects the diversity of contemporary Britain. Christina Coker also highlighted the Cultural Olympiad as an opportunity to explore and celebrate 21<sup>st</sup> century British identity . and as a challenge to the cultural sector, which needs to develop its ability to advocate for culture and to find new models for collaboration and co-investment. Peter Gilroy also argued that the cultural sector could engage more broadly with social issues and the public sector. A speaker from the audience thought that cultural leaders and organisations should take a more prominent role in addressing global issues, and asked how the sector could play a more active role in climate change leadership.

Discussing the re-development of the South Bank Centre, Lord Hollick highlighted another challenge for the cultural sector, the need to develop entrepreneurial skills and new business models: %every arts organisation needs to become enterprising, to anchor its creative work in a business plan that can fund it+. Lynne Brindley questioned whether we have the appropriate governance models in the sector to manage organisations that are blurring the boundaries between public and private sector roles. Both Peter Gilroy and Lord Hollick argued that cultural organisations have an important educational role in helping organisations in other sectors and their staff to develop creatively.

...those individuals in charge of a large organisation? Two questions from the audience framed alternative models of cultural leadership: one, the role of the artist, the other that of the freelance or independent consultant. A third model would be those individuals who lead the very many small-scale creative and cultural organisations across the UK. Many attributes of good leadership apply equally in these contexts: a theme for exploration, perhaps, at a future conference.

Certainly much of the speakers' advice for leaders and emerging leaders applies. Remember to have fun, Christina Coker and Peter Gilroy counselled; Lynne Brindley reminded the conference of the need to look after both physical and mental stamina. Helena Kennedy offered four suggestions for leaders: first, to accept invitations to take on work outside their immediate role or sector, as opportunities for development and enrichment; second, to be involved in social justice issues, as a means of staying connected with the wider world and our shared humanity; third, to make time for love and relationships; and finally, to be funny: making people laugh is a great way to lead. Good advice, in any context.

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