



Fire-fighters in Enschede, in the Netherlands, damp down a smouldering house devastated when an explosion ripped through a nearby fireworks warehouse. A local alderman was given responsibility to lead regeneration after the event, showing good local leadership

For the latest in his series on local government around the world, Robin Hambleton finds out what leadership lessons can be learned from Europe

Taking a lead from Europe



Public Service Futures

How to strengthen local democracy? Leave aside the obvious importance of enhancing the powers of elected local authorities for a moment, and consider what can be done locally.

Some reformers advocate stronger approaches to local leadership. Others claim that enhancing community involvement is the key.

Sometimes caricatured – unhelpfully – as ‘top down’ and ‘bottom up’ approaches to the revitalisation of local democracy, these two approaches to reform tend to be discussed in isolation from one another.

Stated simply, the literature on leadership has tended to neglect themes relating to democratic accountability and public participation. Meanwhile, research and writing in the broad field of community development is largely silent on the theme of leadership.

Indeed, some grass roots organisations seem to feel their democratic vitality will be diluted if attention is focused on supporting local leader-

ship. The findings from a recently-completed European research project throw new light on this issue. In 2001, a consortium of nine universities in nine different countries set out to examine the interplay between leadership and participation in 18 case study cities.

Countries with very different traditions of local government leadership and public involvement were deliberately included – Germany, Greece, Italy, Norway, Poland, Sweden, the Netherlands and the UK. New Zealand was also included to draw insights from the council-manager model used in that country – but still relatively untried in Europe.

The aim of this cross-national

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research project was to generate new insights on how to improve local government by exploring the way innovative local authorities have combined leadership and community involvement in practice.

Funded by the European Commission, the PLUS project – so named as it examined Participation, Leadership and Urban Sustainability – involved the 18 cities as full partners in the design and execution of the research.

I should declare an interest – I was team leader of this international project before I moved to the US in 2002. The PLUS project examines the institutional settings within which actors operate. These institutional ‘rules of the game’ relating to specific policy processes within cities were found to be very powerful in either constraining or liberating leadership at the local level.

For example, in one of the Dutch case studies – Enschede – an alderman was given substantial responsibility to lead regeneration of Roombeek following the tragic explosion of a fireworks factory in the area in 2000.

This devolution of power to a single alderman was a departure from the well-established pattern of col-

lective decision-making in Dutch cities.

The arrangement was a break with tradition – but it worked. It provided the alderman with legitimacy to initiate and co-ordinate policy proposals regarding all policy issues affecting the area.

However, by adopting a consensus building style, he was able to engender a high level of commitment to the regeneration proposals.

The importance of developing the facilitative leadership skills of politicians is an important finding from this research.

There are clear lessons here for leadership training – for both local politicians and officials.

A key lesson from the PLUS project is that enhancing the performance of local government requires improvements in both leadership and community involvement. Do the ‘rules of the game’ in your locality spur or stymie successful leadership is a question worth asking.

For more information on PLUS, visit: www.plus-eura.org

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