

Interview: Steve Radcliffe



Leadership guru Steve Radcliffe has spent years coaching the cabinet secretary, and is now working with several permanent secretaries while planning a series of free lectures for civil servants. Ben Willis catches up with him.

Steve Radcliffe is on a mission to raise the leadership bar in Whitehall. As a prominent leadership coach and author, Radcliffe counts senior executives from HSBC, Reuters and Unilever among his many high-profile clients. For the past eight years he has also been mentoring cabinet secretary Sir Gus O'Donnell and a number of other permanent secretaries, but now he says he wants to see his brand of no-nonsense leadership training permeate all levels of the civil service.

"There are examples of great leadership in the civil service," Radcliffe says. "I talk to Gus and other permanent secretaries who are out there regularly meeting people, and they've always got great stories to tell. But what has been missing has been a commitment to develop people as leaders at all levels, and as a result I would say leadership in the civil service is patchy. What we've got to do is get it more widespread."

Radcliffe is already well on the road to achieving his aim. Besides his one-on-one coaching, he is a regular contributor to the High Potential Development Scheme, which prepares officials for senior civil service roles. Between now and the end of the year, he and his team will also be running four leadership workshops around the country for several hundred civil servants at a time ("For free," he informs me; Radcliffe isn't charging, he says, because he wants to help "make a difference").

Meanwhile, O'Donnell is keen to see still greater awareness of Radcliffe's thinking across Whitehall. "In my role as head of the civil service, I meet inspirational leaders all the time," he tells Civil Service World. "I see first hand what can be achieved with good leaders so I am pleased that, with Steve's help, we will be extending our leadership training to as many staff as possible."

Keep it simple, stupid

So what is it that makes Radcliffe's leadership ideas so seductive to the upper echelons of the civil service? One major clue can be found in the title of his best-selling book, *Leadership, Plain and Simple*. Many of the ideas in the book, Radcliffe says, were developed when, after 15 years as a successful businessman, he decided he wanted to help other leaders to achieve their potential. Although he says he hadn't given the subject of leadership much thought during his business career, as he began looking into it he realised how overly complex it had become.

"I started reading and thinking more and more about this leadership stuff, and along the way read a couple of hundred books on the subject," Radcliffe says. "I realised that the leadership industry is making the whole topic way too complicated. It's as if every writer has tried to come up with smarter models than the guy before. And that was the point I decided: 'No, I'm purposely going to keep this very simple' – and people seem to be very grateful for that."

Another starting point for Radcliffe's thinking on leadership is the notion that, as he found when in business, leaders are often so caught up in their day-to-day work that they don't have time to give much thought to how to do their job better. "They focus their energy and attention on the functional job, the task to be done, but actually haven't spent as much time as they could do thinking about what is this leadership stuff and how do I get better at it," Radcliffe says.

The model that Radcliffe eventually developed for his coaching is based on three basic ideas that he believes are the essential constituents of effective leadership: "Future, engage and deliver".

"When you're trying to make something happen as a leader, your focus needs to be in the future, so you're thinking about: Where do I want to go? What do I want to make happen? What difference do I want to make?" Radcliffe explains. "The second bit is about then interacting with others so they are left wanting to build that future with you. This is the 'engage' element. But crucially it is different to 'communicate at, present to, and tell' – it is not a one-way activity. It is a two-way dialogue and an act of relationship-building; too many leaders don't get that.

"And then the final step is that you've got to get on and deliver. And some of the future you may deliver yourself; but the more you become a true leader, the more you will actually have the future delivered through others."

Civil service weak on delivery and engagement

Applying this model to the civil service, Radcliffe says the surprising thing he first noticed when he began working with officials was that the "delivery" element was sometimes lacking. "There were people talking about the future, having ideas, strategies and plans," he says. "But I didn't see people with the mindset of how would we deliver what we are talking about and how can we tenaciously be looking for ways of improving how we [deliver]. So that was a major missing element a few years ago."

Another deficiency Radcliffe observed was that, perhaps as a result of the hierarchical structure of the civil service, the “engage” component of his model was not always in evidence. “I didn’t see a mindset and desire to engage,” he notes. “I didn’t see it as the way people thought. Communicate stuff, tell people stuff – yes, we’ll do that. But anybody in a position of influencing other people has got to understand the distinction between engaging others and communicating at them.”

On both counts Radcliffe says he has now noticed some improvement. “What I’ve been pleased to see is that delivery is now rising in people’s consciousness,” he says. “And there’s been a realisation that if we want to deliver more, we’ve got to engage our people more; but to engage people, we’ve got to have a great story to tell about the future.”

I suggest to Radcliffe that with many parts of the civil service facing uncertain times ahead, leaders face a difficult task in painting this positive picture of the future and taking people along with them. How can they hope to inspire disillusioned staff and get more out of them with jobs, pay and benefits under attack?

Radcliffe agrees that indeed it is a challenging time for civil service leaders. But equally, he believes that because of this, the future-engage-deliver model is perhaps more relevant than ever in giving leaders the necessary tools to take staff through the hard times.

“When we had the financial crash, a client said to me: ‘Crikey Steve, everyone will need more of future-engage-deliver now’,” Radcliffe says. “In these difficult times, there will need to be a stronger sense of what future we’re building, because without that we will despair. Second, people will have to be engaged; there will have to be more collaboration to make things happen, and there will need to be a sharper focus on what are we delivering and how can we get better at that. So I’m completely confident that future-engage-deliver gives people a way of raising their game in difficult times.”

From top to bottom

While the simplicity of his approach forms one of its key strengths, says Radcliffe, it’s also particularly valuable because it fosters leadership at all levels of an organisation, rather than concentrating on senior managers. When he was formulating his thinking on leadership, he recalls, he noticed that most authors and thinkers appeared to regard it as the preserve of the people right at the top of the hierarchy. Turning this idea on its head is one of the central themes of his work.

“There’s an old story of leadership, and a new one,” he explains. “The old one is about how leaders are people in senior positions, they will generally be older than me, they might have been to the right school or university; at the most extreme, they will be explorers! And the implication, somehow, is that they are special and I am not. And I think that is a seriously limiting story.”

Instead, Radcliffe preaches the idea that leadership can be practised at any level and happens when people, no matter what their rank, take it upon themselves to

make happen something they really want to happen. “The new story is that being a leader has got nothing to do with your title, your experience, your position, your personality type,” he says. “It is simply about getting in touch with something you care about, deciding to do something about it and bringing people along with you at the same time.”

Encouraging staff to take the initiative in this way, to become leaders in their own right, is another area where Radcliffe feels the civil service has been lacking and is something he hopes to change. “I don’t think the culture of the organisation has said: ‘We want you to bring your very best to work, we want your ideas, we want your creativity’,” he says. “I don’t think that has been the mentality; I want to be a prompt [to change that]. We need leaders at all levels and we need to learn how to get better at this.”

Let’s get together

Radcliffe says that were he able to “wave a magic wand”, his vision for the civil service would be an organisation that is more “joined up” in its approach to leadership. One of the big contrasts he notes between the civil service and the private sector is that the challenges faced by the former are far greater and more complex than the latter. “So recognising that tells me that in Whitehall, we’ve got to be even more joined up, even better at collaboration, and there are many areas of government where there’s a way to go there,” he says.

In leadership terms Radcliffe says this would translate into what he describes as a “common language” for leadership: “How do financial people talk together? By having a common language. How do policy people talk together? By having a common language. But few organisations have a common language for leadership. It’s entirely possible, if the civil service grabs hold of this, to start to create a common language, which has leadership as something that is talked about – and the more it’s talked about, the more it will go from patchy to widespread.”

Overall, Radcliffe is optimistic about the future of leadership in Britain and, by extension, the civil service. Two years ago, when he was asked this question in an interview, Radcliffe said that, no, he was not hopeful about the state of leadership in this country. This was at the height of the financial crisis, when many leaders were going into what Radcliffe describes as a default mode of “panic, control and telling people what to do”.

Now, he feels, things have moved on: “I’m now much more optimistic, because people have realised that this is where we are, we need to think a way out of it, and it starts with creating a sense of future that can give people hope and optimism. But it’s still going to be a challenge.”

Radcliffe’s ideas are not just about building leadership, but empowering people to feel valued in their work by giving them the necessary tools to fulfil their potential – and this is his ultimate goal, not just for the civil service but for all the organisations with which he works.

“I would like people coming to work feeling as though they’re there to make a difference; to make things happen they feel good about. And I want them to

recognise that they're doing something within a larger goal that the organisation is trying to achieve," he says. "If a few ideas about leadership can help that come about, I would be delighted."

Civil Service World is running a series of free leadership events in partnership with Civil Service Learning, Gus O'Donnell and Steve Radcliffe. If you would like more information about these or to find out how your department could develop its own

CV Highlights

1953 Born in Wigan, Lancashire

1974 Graduates with an MA in Natural Sciences, St Catherine's College, Oxford University; joins Procter and Gamble as a brand manager

1979 Moves to Redheads Advertising as an account director

1984 Joins Tambrands Inc as UK marketing manager. Moves to USA subsidiary Physicians Formula as chief executive, then returns to Tambrands as vice-president for Europe

1991 Founds leadership coaching company Steve Radcliffe Associates

Written by Ben Willis, CSW