

Neil Barnett  
(Leeds Beckett University)

Arianna Giovannini  
(De Montfort University)

Steven Griggs  
(De Montfort University)

Contact: [sgriggs@dmu.ac.uk](mailto:sgriggs@dmu.ac.uk)

# Ensuring the New Municipalism: the Leadership of Senior Officers

## Super- directorates?

- ‘There’s been a huge shift in the range of responsibilities (...) 10 years ago, normally 2/3 people would have been responsible for all those areas (...) now we have witnessed an amalgamation of portfolios under one CO.’
- ‘Everything that isn’t adult and children’s services falls into my directorate.’
- ‘We used to be 5 directors [in the senior management team], and in the department I run, there used to be three and there used to be 9 assistant directors. Now, there’s me and two assistant directors. So, we’ve taken out from the top management tier to try and protect frontline services.’
- ‘I am not saying that it is all bad, but it is quite dramatic. If you go back to a 2005 structure for all activities [in the directorate], you’re probably down a good 20 chief officers.’

# Firefighting?

- 'the environment has shifted for a while now...we are forced to be more reactive, there's no way around it. [...] I have to deal with more...and yes, there's more short term pressure.'
- 'you get drawn into more things ...often you might deviate from your normal day job...there is probably more firefighting than there should be.'
- 'Austerity has required us to focus more on what really makes a difference – but that goes with losing the ability in the sector to stand back, to value reflection time that we need to look at innovative approaches...'
- 'build confidence that focusing on the immediate is actually a way of building towards strategic outcomes [...so you have to] keep the focus on what you're setting out to do while you sometimes deviate.'
- 'we are also doing the operational and technical stuff when we are also doing the strategic direction of the local authority.'

# Moving across spaces

- ‘On a typical day I have leadership roles across the council, corporate meetings, I chair various bodies within and outside the council, have to carve out time to do ‘ward walks’ (...), then governance related meetings (...) for example with the combined authority, but also meetings with partners we deliver services with...and they are a very wide range.’
- ‘you can do a lot in collaboration without making a formal decision.’
- ‘to position [yourself] wherever there is a noise and a gap.’
- ‘We have had to create structures within the council to bring people together to assist them to understand the shifting landscape, so we are developing policy, strategies, initiatives... checking in that it aligns with what others are doing.’
- ‘see [...] yourself as part of a different team, but at the same time still remembering that you’ve got an at the ranch agenda.’

## A new municipalism?

- 'Austerity is here to stay. Over the years, it has pushed us [COs] to think differently focusing on a commercial perspective to compensate for government cuts.'
- 'Austerity has forced us to be more efficient, to do things differently, to think more commercially...it is not a good thing, but it's not a bad thing either.'
- 'lack of resources means that you can do less, but actually it also pushes you to focus on what will have a real impact'
- 'pride in not doing what everyone else is doing'.
- 'A rediscovery of self-belief[...] councils still have muscle'.

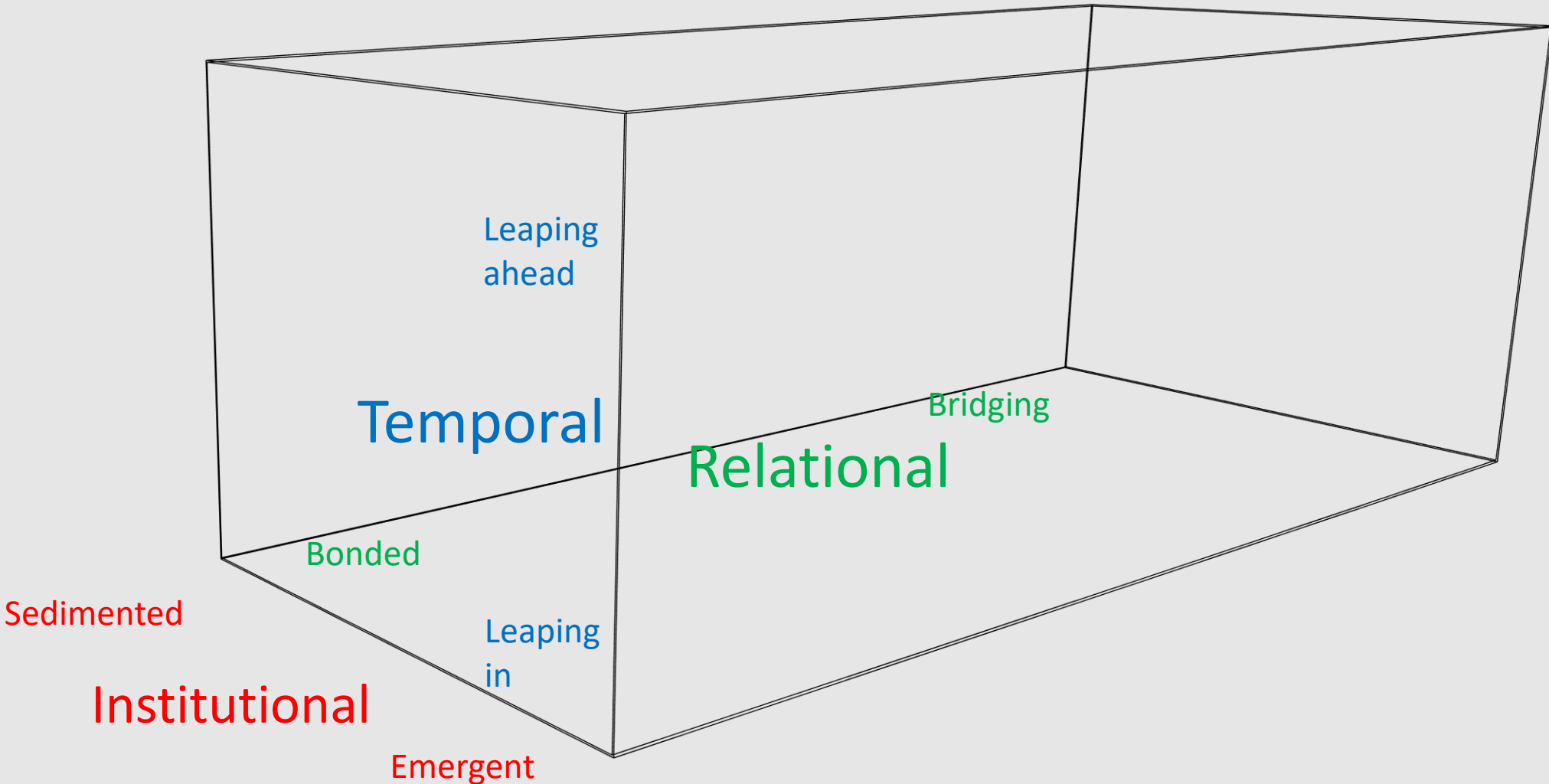
# Resilience

- ‘In practice, I’m on call 24/7. My portfolio spans so much that in practice there’s always something coming up – my diary is just an indication of what I have to do, but on an average day other things will come up.’
- ‘ You just have to deal with it and find a way... it has been a challenge, [...] but if you have the core skills, you just grow a bit and learn to do some new things quickly [...] it's not a job for the faint- hearted.’
- ‘Chief officers have always been under pressure...you *have to* get used to pressure, and you *do* get used to pressure. Resilience is one of the key skills needed. You’ve got to accept challenges, it’s part of the job (...) the responsibilities have always been huge, but now there is less time and capacity and so you have to use time and capacity more effectively – you have to lead, focus on strategy, plan well, develop external networks and relationships, and get elected members on side.’

## Purchase of traditional concerns?

- Generic versus specialist skills
- Split responsibilities between department and council
- Maintaining the political-administrative boundaries
  
- It's all about the generic
- Split responsibilities, if they exist, between department, council, partnership, regional bodies
- Mushrooming of informal spaces where officers 'occupy' representative function, as well as 'standing in' for accountability mechanisms

# Moving Across Dimensions: Interpreting the Leadership of Senior Officers





## Serial adapters

- Now, dominant thinking is to portray officers as 'boundary spanners' who bring these different spaces together, speak across these.
- Evidence both supports and challenges this perspective.
- Move instead from compartment to compartment, quickly reading the script, gaining a sense of the rules.
- Leadership as a process of serial adaptation.

# Implications for leadership

- Risks are:
  - 1. Instrumental shape-shifting or
  - 2. Over-reliance on one style of leadership.
- Authenticity, leading through values, conviction and lived experience - knowing yourself.
- Cultivating resilience
- A proviso
  - Need to challenge own values, puzzling and other ways of knowing and being
  - Normative foundations? Ensuring council stewardship of place and pragmatic adversarialism
  - Possibilities of new municipalism as mobilising narrative across local authorities

# Moving forward

- Ensuring time and space for strategic thinking and critical reflection
- Balance between skills and values in selection and appointment processes
- Review accountability and representation across landscape of local government – power of invitation
- Audit internal communication processes – how does information pass across the organization
- Consider the impact of social media on staff
- ‘Filling in’ in-house capabilities - time for an appraisal of workforce planning
- Review building resilience and ensuring retention strategies

# Supporting the changing role of senior leaders

- Do these pictures of the changing role of senior leadership resonate with your own everyday experience?
- How far is the role of senior leaders changing?
- What skills and capabilities do you increasingly use to navigate the demands of your role?
- What would support you in your role? Are there new leadership and development needs across the sector?