

Case study: Constructing authority

This is a 'What-if' scenario, created from material collected in 2012, as part of a research project by Alana McDonald, to identify and make available leadership experiences from LDC alumni.

The purpose of the case study is to stimulate reflection and discussion on leadership practice. You can either reflect on the scenario yourself, or use it in a facilitated discussion to examine a group's thoughts and ideas on the scenario.

If you have any comments or feedback, contact toolkits@ldc.govt.nz

You are in a second tier director's role which has existed for over 40 years with minimal change to its purpose or scope. Your role is responsible for approximately 25 staff working as a semi-autonomous agency within a larger organisation. The work requires a lot of complex process, and whilst the agency has relationships with many others, like your own, they have an ingrained culture of operating independently from each other. Within the agency, most individuals are technical specialists, reasonably introverted and protective of their individual work outputs.

A review was recently completed on the organisation and agreed by Cabinet, and your role was identified as requiring a wider scope and focus. Essentially, you are now not only responsible for your 25 staff and implementing change within your own agency structure; but also for creating an integrated, comprehensive and connected organisation. Your role was identified as the one that would manage and establish cross-agency outcomes with no extra funding; no precedent and anticipated resistance from agency heads towards a change to across agency approaches.

Questions

- How could you go about achieving this direction from Cabinet?
- What would be some key leadership themes to ensure success?

Messages from a leader

You can't rely on textbook solutions

- You can read as many textbooks as you can on transformational leadership, or leadership in general, but don't be surprised if things don't turn out the way you expect them to. Resistance can come from anywhere—you have to be open to receive it and understand why.

Be mindful of unwanted authority

- When establishing a capability of working across functions or agencies, where there has previously been none, be aware that some people will not want authority or direction. It is challenging to establish and/or govern something when you have been given no authority, but tasked to do so. You often need to rely much more heavily on your relationship management skills and personally earned authority than on the formal authority vested in the role.