

# Two Parliaments of Pain

Chief executives are under no illusions as to the challenges ahead. Helen Olsen reports from Solace 2009.



Two things struck hard at the Solace conference this year for a public sector techy journalist.

Firstly, the society of local authority chief executive's annual shindig was overshadowed by the inevitability of deep cuts in public spending. In a straw poll conducted around the delegate hall, chief executives were unanimous in expecting savage cuts to their council's budgets: "Up to 30% over the next two years."

Delegates are agreed that the colour of the next government is irrelevant - they are preparing for 'two parliaments of pain'; the budget cupboard is bare.

Secondly, despite approximately a third of the exhibitors being technology-related organisations, technology was not a hot topic. Why?

Chief executives, again unanimously in the sample spoken to, felt that technology people "did not speak their language". Setting up a meeting with technology people and suppliers was not top of the list of their concerns. Technology was "a tool wasn't it?"; we all "know what it can do".

Moreover, unfortunately for the technology industry, phrases such as "dramatically over sold and under-delivered" were oft repeated.

That notwithstanding, all agreed that technology, as a tool, had the ability to deliver real benefits to service transformation.

It is just that, so far, it hasn't delivered the promised goods. Everyone has experience of IT projects that are over budget, of systems that don't work, of efficiency dreams never delivered. And all are wary of the large scale, high profile central government IT disasters. Add in the

unending stream of data losses and it is understandable that chief executives are not looking to technology 'above all' to help them through the recession.

Meanwhile, technology people - both inside and outside local government - are still not able to translate the bits and bytes, the widgets and the infrastructures, into plain English that imparts exactly 'what' the technology will 'do' for local government and provide a solid (and credible) business case to prove it.

This lack of engagement by the technology community with the wider council has long been discussed. In recent years Socitm has urged its members to 'take their place at the top table'.

So, why has this never happened? To truly help the public sector through the most challenging time of its life, technologists must engage with chief executives and finance directors to outline how, why and where technology can effect change. And provide the evidence - and the business case - to prove it.

Meanwhile, chief executives were urged to see the recession as an "opportunity to excel" by speaker and business guru, Rene Carayol. Difficult times, he said, could provide "a moment" to be radical. Success, he said would depend on changing culture, on bringing the organisation with them. He urged chief executives to shift their organisations' cultures to ones that were "performance driven but values led".

More than ordinary organisations, Carayol reminded his audience, local government had the power to "make a tangible difference to people's lives".

Carayol suggested that councils could

learn much from companies like Virgin - which always collaborates on new ventures, never invests; and always looks to partnerships to deliver new services.

Indeed, the airlines were much revered at Solace, with Barnet chief executive, Nick Walkley, later outlining the 'EasyJet' model of local service delivery in a lively workshop entitled, "Beyond Efficiency, Leadership through Two Parliaments of Pain".

Solace Enterprises director, Martin Horton, said that the sector was good at innovation but unable to react in the same way as the private sector: "There is so much political and emotional effort invested in innovation by the time you've pressed it through."

The political challenge facing chief executives, he said was "the killing of things that we've invested in. Difficult, but somehow we must get past that."

One chief executive said that her council was "reframing our questions. What do we actually have to do as bedrock? Whilst we are talking about efficiency we are effectively cutting back on staff capacity. We need to ask, *why* are we providing pest control? Not, *how* do we provide pest control."

Indeed, said another, "We must ask, what would our organisation look like with 20 percent less cash?"

"We are going to have to go back to the big suppliers (BT etc) and have discussions of how they are going to work with the public sector and contribute to the changes - input versus output."

The next two parliaments are going to be painful indeed - for local government, citizens and suppliers to local government.



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