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In May 2020, participants from the Sport and Physical Activity: Leadership Essentials Programme came together to reflect on their experiences at the beginning of coronavirus. Based on their experiences we heard a real sense of optimism and desire, not just to do things differently but to do them fundamentally differently. Take a look at what we heard.

In October, the group reconvened. Returning to their hopes and fears from May with a renewed focus on personal agency. They reflected on what they’d learned and observed, asking themselves “irrespective of what has happened, or may happen, what can I do?”

They recognised that being adaptive was key – working adaptively and still taking risks; modifying ways of working – but most importantly having clarity, focus and a common purpose.

There were continued fears of the ever-widening of inequalities and they felt the need to have the difficult conversations that challenge traditional ways of working and the status quo. Collaboration has to be the way forward.

The visual on the following page gives an overview of the discussions that took place.

We also heard how they felt they’d enriched their humility, empathy and understanding. This was a theme that also came across strongly from participants who’d recently been on the online version of the leadership programme (December 2020). When discussing the type of leadership we need moving forward, it was clear it’s about both heart and head. The visual opposite, by Tamnay Vora, summarises this perfectly and was shared among participants.

Looking to the future

The LGA and Sport England are now running more Leadership Essentials programmes online and have two programmes in January-March and April-May. If you’re interested in the programme please email the LGA at cts@local.gov.uk
In April and May of this year, the LGA and Sport England, alongside the Leadership Centre, provided a space for those who had been on Leadership Essentials to reconnect. It was a shared space to have conversations, share experiences, and have some time to think about agency and influence, particularly in how participants wanted to help shape services in the future.

In October and November, we came back together to reflect on what we have learned and observed with a renewed focus on personal agency. We asked ourselves the question, “irrespective of what has happened, or may happen, what can I do?” This is the story of our conversations.

We have enriched our humility, empathy and understanding. We have become more aware of the urgent need to focus on people facing disadvantage and exclusion. Even with a deeper understanding of lived experiences, we understand we don’t have the answers, and that we need to listen harder to people facing these challenges.

We have worked adaptively and taken risks. All whilst understanding the importance of context and impact. We needed to change quickly to recognise how we can courageously deliver services differently.

We have adapted to how new ways of working have affected dynamics. We learnt to be flexible and responsive to how others, and ourselves, are engaging within new environments and technologies.

We have collectively built ownership of the task at hand. From inconsistency of messaging to working in brand new roles, we needed to take ownership of the situation so we could put sport and activity on the map.

We have recognised the importance of positivity. In a not so positive context, leading with positivity can go far, as well as embodying the ways we support our teams ourselves.

We have valued partnerships and collaboration. Collaboration has helped us grasp opportunities and strengthen partnerships. We have immersed ourselves amongst the people and projects around us, whilst having that “top cover” that creates safe spaces and the conditions to work in coordinated ways.

We have worked adaptively and taken risks. All whilst understanding the importance of context and impact. We needed to change quickly to recognise how we can courageously deliver services differently.

Since the start of the year, we have engaged differently, and seen a radical change in our work.

We need to focus on people facing disadvantage and exclusion. Even with a deeper understanding of lived experiences, we understand we don’t have the answers, and that we need to listen harder to people facing these challenges.

We need to adapt to how new ways of working have affected dynamics. We learnt to be flexible and responsive to how others, and ourselves, are engaging within new environments and technologies.

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Leadership Essentials Reflection
Autumn 2020

We will meet the challenges we will face moving forward. We will...

1. Truly understand what it means to collaborate.
   With partners, communities and within our organisations. How do we do it and develop a co-owned approach that both builds strong relationships and creates real change?

2. Remain true to our purpose and values.
   Avoid the competition for funding between organisations by being more collaborative and come together even more, building a strong voice together.

3. Be ambitious and continue the drive for collective impact.
   Prioritise and get a balance between fire fighting in the sector and strategic planning for systemic change.

4. Reframe activity as part of the prevention agenda.
   To not only increase the value of the sector, but to make real lasting change for the health of all people.

5. Be present as we engage with others and ourselves.
   On zoom, in developing purpose and in building relationships. Bringing our ‘whole selves’.

6. Focus on ecosystems
   A focus on living systems can help us to understand the ripple effects of change, and how this knowledge will affect our decisions and strategy.

And so, we will use our influence to make change happen.

- We will collaborate and share learning
  We will collaborate within and beyond the sector to influence the national agenda and share our learning.

- We will reframe the narrative
  We will reframe activity to be not only fun, but a preventative priority.

- We will do the hard work
  We will have the difficult conversations that challenge the status quo.

- We will work with local leadership
  We will work with local leaders who currently are under the Covid spotlight.

To do this we need support.

We need **Open and Honest Spaces** that enable...
- ...opportunities to share emerging practice and learn from each other
- ...connection with those who aren’t in our day-to-day operation
- ...flowing, unstructured connecting conversations
- ...dreaming and coming up with ideas for possible futures

We need **Facilitation** that will help us...
- ...develop a practice of collaboration that we can continue to develop

We need **Leadership and Influence** to...
- ...carry our messages and experiences to more layers of the system
- ...help us understand our role in Sport England’s strategy

Icons by Martins Ratkus from the Noun Project