

## Sir Ashley Bloomfield

This article is an edited version of the Sir Frank Holmes Memorial Lecture delivered at Victoria University of Wellington on 23 November 2022.

# Developing Future Public Service Leaders for Aotearoa New Zealand

---

### Abstract

The New Zealand public service performs comparatively very well internationally and this has been evident during the global Covid-19 pandemic. The public service will need strong and adaptable leadership in future to respond effectively to significant global challenges and threats to public trust, and the need for better public policy responses to extant 'wicked' problems. The pandemic response in New Zealand and internationally provides strong pointers as to what New Zealand should do to develop public service leaders for the future.

**Keywords** leadership, public service, Covid-19, public trust

---

In late 2019, the *Economist*, the Nuclear Threat Initiative and Johns Hopkins University published the 2019 Global Health Security Index, which ranked 195 countries or jurisdictions on their capacities, across a range of domains, to

prepare for epidemics and pandemics (GHS Index, 2019). The assessment ranked the United States and the United Kingdom as the two best-prepared countries. New Zealand came in a lowly 35th.

---

Sir Ashley Bloomfield is a public health medicine specialist. He served as the director-general of health between June 2018 and July 2022. In this capacity he was responsible for leading the nation's public health response to the Covid-19 pandemic. He previously held senior positions in the Ministry of Health and district health boards, and worked earlier in his career for the World Health Organization in Geneva. Address for correspondence: bloomfielda.who@gmail.com.

As we now know, just a few months later those preparations were put to the test with the emergence of a novel coronavirus, leading the World Health Organization to declare a global pandemic on 11 March 2020.

There were many things that lay behind the gap between apparent readiness for a pandemic and the delivery of an effective response in different jurisdictions. A prominent one was the quality of leadership – by politicians especially, and also public service, business and community leaders. I want this evening to share my reflections on public service leadership in New Zealand, taking a look at what we know about perceptions of, and the impact of, that leadership presently, and share my view of lessons we learnt through the Covid-19 response. I also want to identify the attributes I think will be essential for future public service leaders and make a few comments on what we might need to do differently to ensure we develop those leaders here in Aotearoa.

### Current leadership expectations, values and principles

Te Kawa Mataaho, the Public Service Commission, has a clear set of values that outline 'how New Zealand expects public servants to behave to maintain public service integrity'. These values are codified in section 16 of the Public Service Act 2020. Public servants are expected to be:

- impartial;
- accountable;
- trustworthy;
- responsive;
- respectful.

Alongside these values is a set of principles that underpin how the public service should operate:

- politically neutral;
- free and frank advice;
- merit-based appointments;
- open government;
- stewardship.

## ... New Zealanders trust their government more than any other nation in the world, although its competence is viewed less positively ...

So, what do we know about how the New Zealand public service performs in delivering against these expectations?

### Transparency

I want to turn first to the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index, which is quite widely known. New Zealand has been first equal on this index for the last three years and is consistently in the top two (Transparency International, 2021).<sup>1</sup> In 2021 New Zealand, along with Denmark and Finland, scored 88 points; for comparison, the UK was in 11th place with 78 points, Australia 18th on 73 points, and the US 27th on 67 points. Of course, the most important comparison is with ourselves – that is, how are we doing over time, and are we making progress on the matters that account for the 12-point gap between our current score and a 'perfect 100'? From 2013 to 2015 our score peaked

at 91, so there has been a small, but not precipitous, decline in recent years. This contrasts with much larger declines in the scores for Australia (a 12-point drop since 2012), Canada (a 10-point drop since 2012) and the US (a 9-point drop since 2015).

Transparency International noted in its 2016 report that the most common issues causing concern in high-scoring countries were closed-door deals, conflicts of interest, illicit finance and patchy law enforcement; in its latest (2021) report the issues were the blurred line between politics and business, inadequate controls on political finance, opaque lobbying, and the revolving doors between industries and their regulators.

So, New Zealand performs well here, and this is no small thing. Corruption undermines public trust, as well as the effectiveness and equity of public services

if funding is not used for the purpose intended but is siphoned off for other purposes. However, we cannot afford to be complacent.

### Public trust in government globally ...

Related to perception of public sector corruption is public trust in government – and I want to make the point that 'small g' government in New Zealand includes the executive, Parliament and the public service. I'm going to talk a bit about this, as trust is fundamental to effective governance and was central to the effectiveness – or otherwise – of pandemic responses around the world.

Since 2000, Edelman has undertaken an annual survey of trust in government and other key groups and institutions, the Edelman Trust Barometer (Edelman, 2022). Prior to the pandemic, across the 28 countries surveyed (36,000 people), public

trust had declined significantly over the previous decade or so. Presenting the results of the 2022 survey at the World Economic Forum in January 2022, Richard Edelman described the current global situation as a 'vicious cycle of distrust' that threatens societal stability (World Economic Forum, 2022). He noted that:

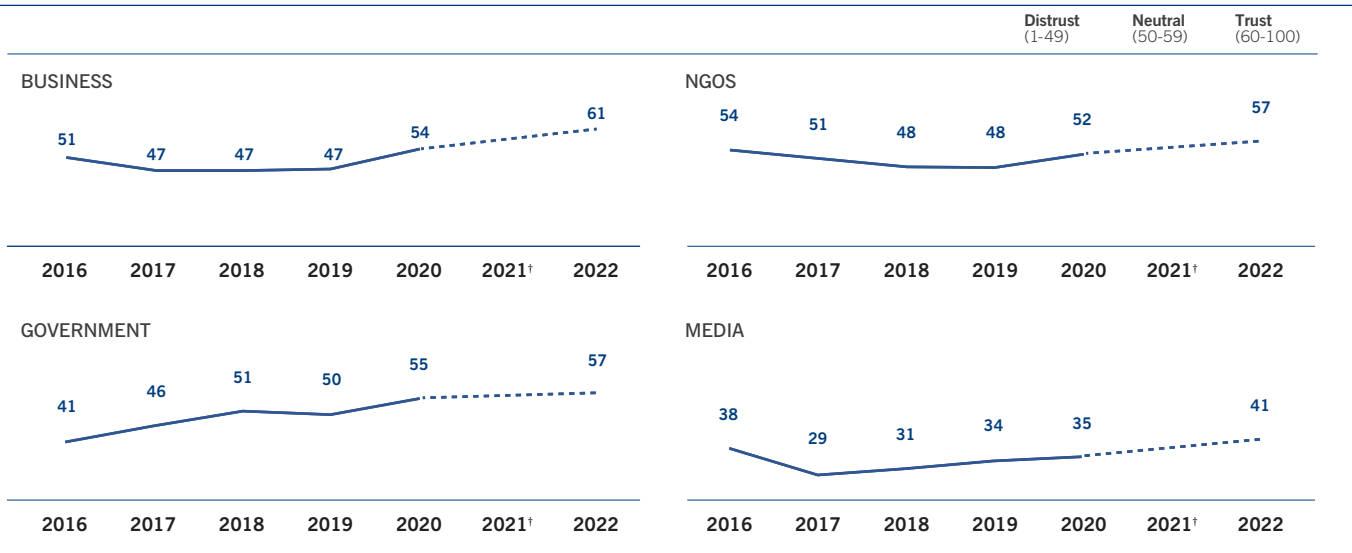
- globally, almost two-thirds of people are inclined to distrust organisations, which could impact attempts to tackle Covid-19 and climate change;
- scientists are the most trusted in society, and government leaders the least trusted;
- the barometer shows four forces at work, including a failure of leadership that could destabilise society, according to Edelman: he points the finger at 'governments and the media feeding a cycle of disinformation and division for votes and clicks';
- it is possible to break the cycle of distrust and rebuild public trust through factual information and demonstrable progress.

### ... and in New Zealand

While New Zealand is not one of the 28 countries in the global survey, the survey is carried out here by Acumen. The Acumen Edelman Trust Barometer 2020 (with field work completed in late 2019, just prior to the pandemic) concluded that 'New Zealanders trust their government more than any other nation in the world, although its competence is viewed less positively' (Acumen, 2020). The New Zealand government was the only one among 29 countries included in that Acumen Edelman Trust Barometer to be viewed as 'ethical' by locals.

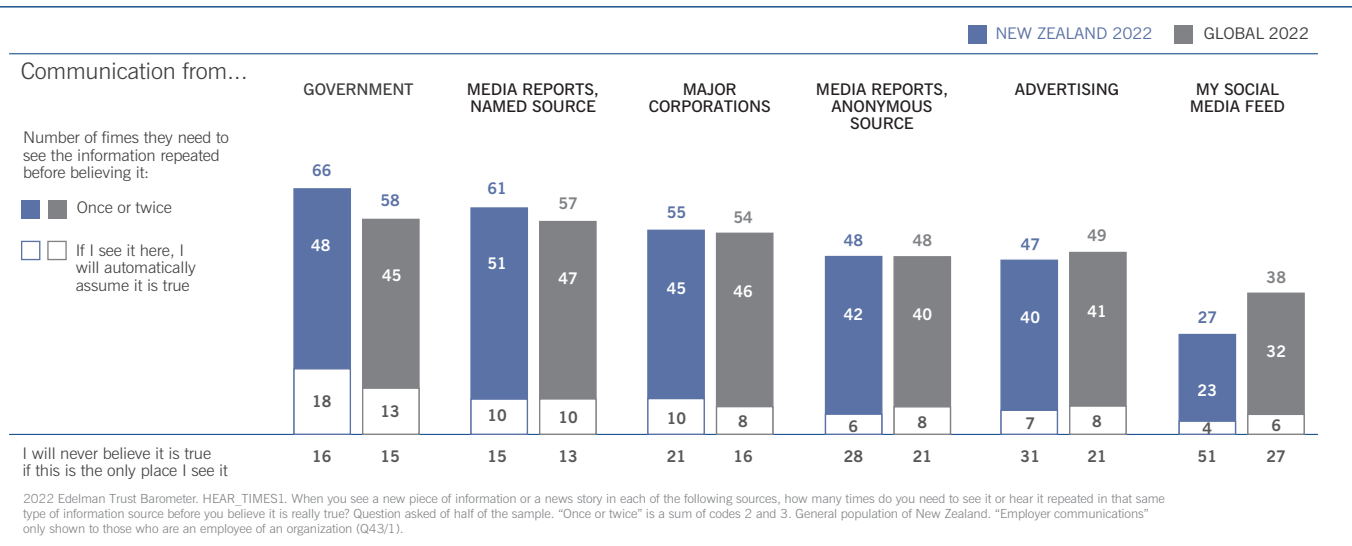
The more recent 2022 results are encouraging in many respects and also provide pointers to the qualities and skills required of our future public service leaders (Acumen, 2022). On the good news side, New Zealand was unique among democracies in seeing an *increase* in overall trust between 2020/21 and 2022 (remembering that the fieldwork is completed in November the year before). This increase is all the more significant when contrasted with the 'biggest losers': Germany (–7%), Australia (–6%), South Korea and the US (both with a 5% drop).

Figure 1: Trust in New Zealand over time\*



Source: Acumen 2022 \* Percent trust, in New Zealand †New Zealand 2021 results unavailable

Figure 2: Information sources that are most trusted\*



\* Percent who believe information from each source automatically, or after see it twice or less, in New Zealand Source: Acumen 2022

Furthermore, trust in key institutions in New Zealand – government, business, NGOs and the media – increased over the last five years (Figure 1). This is not generally the picture in other democracies. I should note that trust in the media in New Zealand is a lot lower than the global average (41% vs 50%), which contrasts with higher trust in government in New Zealand (57% vs 52% globally). New Zealand is also a standout regarding trust in government leaders – eight percentage points ahead of the global average.

Government is also the most trusted source of information, ahead of media reports, corporations, advertising and social media feeds (Figure 2). This trust in government as a source of information is considerably higher in New Zealand than the global average (66% vs 58%). It is also

encouraging to see that New Zealanders are more sceptical about their social media feeds than citizens in many other countries.

These findings are consistent with those of the Te Kawa Mataaho quarterly surveys of public trust and confidence in the public service, which have shown a steady increase in trust over the last decade, with a large increase during the pandemic (Public Service Commission, 2022).

I think it is safe to say that at least part of the explanation for these results is the government’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and it accords with the findings of surveys conducted during the first 18 months of the pandemic showing high levels of public support for the response.

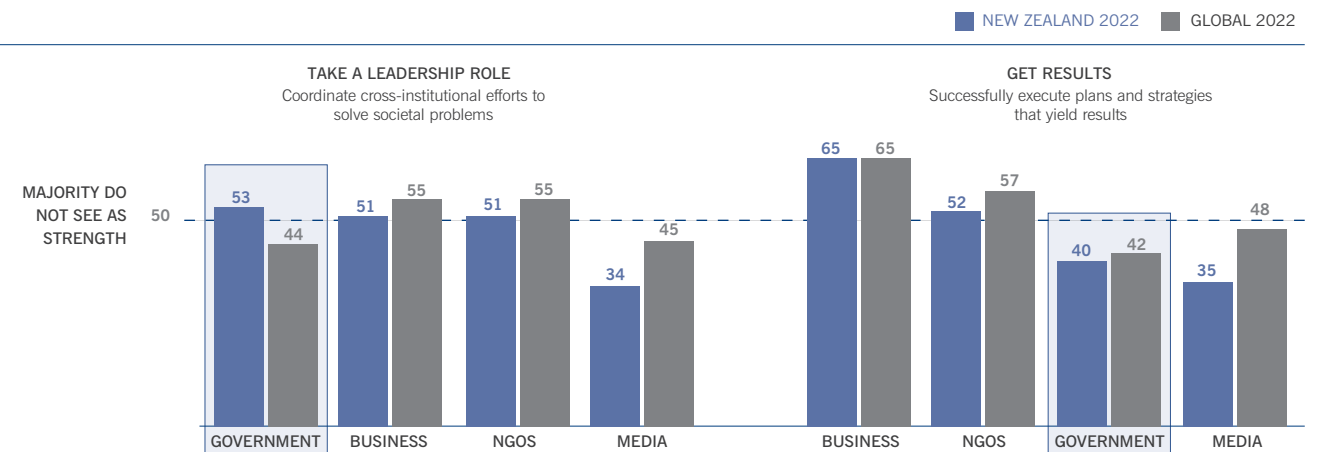
I can’t emphasise enough how important these findings are in the context of falling levels of trust globally, significant

economic and social challenges both on and offshore, and our current ‘VUCA’ world – volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. They are also a very clear reminder of the importance of trust and the need for public service leaders to constantly consider how they can build and maintain that trust. Trust is a public service leader’s key currency – with ministers, with colleagues, with staff and, of course, with the public.

**Public service effectiveness**

A further finding of the Acumen Edelman Trust Barometer 2022 was a reasonable level of public confidence in government’s ability to take a leadership role to coordinate cross-institutional efforts to solve societal problems (Figure 3). There is a much higher level of confidence in

Figure 3: Governmental Leadership offset by inability to get results\*



2022 Edelman Trust Barometer. CMP\_ARE\_(INS). Thinking about [institutions] as they are today, please indicate whether you consider each of the following dimensions to be one of their areas of strength or weakness. 5-point scale; top 2 box, strength. Question asked of half the sample. General population, New Zealand.

\* Percent who say each is a strength of institutions, in New Zealand Source: Acumen 2022

government to do this in New Zealand than there is globally (53% vs 44%), which contrasts with findings for business, NGOs and the media. There is a kicker, though: there is a much lower level of confidence in government to deliver results. This finding has obvious implications for future public service leaders.

Looking further, New Zealand’s public service does perform well in international comparisons. The International Civil Service Effectiveness (InCiSE) Index 2019 rated New Zealand second (to the UK) in terms of overall effectiveness (Blavatnik School of Government, 2019). New Zealand rated highest of the 38 countries surveyed on three domains: capabilities, integrity and procurement. Interestingly, two areas where New Zealand didn’t perform quite so well were crisis and risk management, and tax administration.

Our management of crises and risks has certainly been tested several times in recent years – for example, by *Mycoplasma bovis*, the Christchurch mosques terrorist attack, the Whakaari eruption, and, of course, the Covid-19 pandemic – and has performed well on each occasion. And our tax administration system has been significantly improved and upgraded in recent years, as anyone who uses MyIRD will know.

So saying, we all know where the proof of the pudding is. My experience in the public service is that we are generally strong on policy development, and it is in implementation where things fall down. Sometimes the reasons for this are outside the direct control of the public service: for example, where a change of government

leads to a change in policy and subsequent implementation priorities. However, reflecting on my (by no means unique) experience and the relevant findings of the Acumen Edelman survey, it is clear that the public service could be stronger on delivery.

**Leadership lessons from Covid-19**

I have been reflecting for some time on my personal leadership lessons from over 20 years in public service leadership roles. Many of these lessons were highlighted or amplified during the Covid-19 pandemic. I’ve distilled these down to five key lessons, which, you will see, are linked. All are relevant to future public service leaders.

I want to set the scene first with the definition of leadership I have found most helpful: that ‘leadership is an invitation to collective action’.

The first lesson is the importance of leaders being able to ensure and constantly articulate a clear sense of purpose and direction; in other words, the sense of ‘why’. It is important to note here that ‘ensuring’ direction is not the same as ‘giving’ direction. The former is a process of engaging people in identifying, agreeing and owning the purpose, consistent with the definition of leadership as an ‘invitation to collective action’.

During the Covid-19 pandemic we saw New Zealanders across the country embrace the call to action, especially during the lockdowns and in response to the vaccination programme. A key reason for this is that they understood clearly the ‘why’ – the need to stop the virus transmitting to protect themselves, others and the health

system. The response was quite remarkable, and in my mind demonstrates the fundamental importance of generating a clear and compelling sense of purpose, which then unleashes huge energy and action.

I witnessed this on a daily basis in the public service, where people did extraordinary work – often without being asked – because they were so clear about the purpose and knew where their work fitted in and how important it was. Often as leaders we focus too much on the ‘what?’ and ‘how?’ without taking enough time to engage people fully in the ‘why?’ The pandemic response highlighted that people have a very good idea of what to do and how to do it if they have a clear sense of purpose. The leader’s job is to ensure direction and adequate resourcing and then, more or less, get out of the way.

A second key lesson was the importance of trust, which I’ve already spent some time on. Arguably, trust was the essential ingredient in New Zealand’s successful pandemic response, and clear, consistent and honest communication was the most important public health intervention. There were several key elements of the communication approach: regular, and for long periods daily, stand-ups where any and all questions were answered (sometimes the same question repeatedly); ‘turning up’ for interviews regularly, especially when the ‘heat’ was on; and owning and explaining changes in advice and mistakes.

Third, leadership is about values and acting in accordance with those values.



This is especially so in a crisis situation where there are high uncertainty, high stakes and limited information. Leaders need to be able to acknowledge and manage their own emotional response and then act from their values, both personal and organisational. I'm talking here about the way we behave, especially under pressure: to quote, 'we judge ourselves by our intentions, others judge us by our behaviours' (Lennox, 2017).

Chesley 'Sully' Sullenburger, who successfully landed US Airways flight 1549 on the Hudson River in New York on 21 January 2009, interviewed 11 prominent US leaders from across the military, government, private sector and non-government organisations as part of a book on the topic. Here is what one of those leaders said when asked what he learned from his key mentor early in his career: 'Number one, he was – you're not going to believe this – a good human being. He had good values. He had integrity. He was straightforward. He was good-humored. He was just a good person to be around, okay?' (Sullenburger, 2016, p.62). Actually, I *do* believe it because it accords fully with my experience. Our behaviours are the outward expression of our values: the mantra I use is 'every interaction, every day'.

During the pandemic I was always very conscious as I fronted the media that I was representing the public service and I wanted to uphold and demonstrate public service values. I also drew heavily on four values to underpin my personal response; that is, 'how I wanted to come across': kindness, humility, courage and integrity.

I am still getting used to people approaching me on the street to thank me 'and the team', and I've received hundreds of letters, cards and emails from members of the public. A common theme is that the daily stand-ups provided people with a sense of both connection and reassurance, especially during the first lockdown in the face of great uncertainty and attendant anxiety. People comment often on the fact that I came across as calm and reassuring and that this conveyed a sense that 'everything would be all right'. As I've shared publicly before, I did not exactly feel calm during the stand-ups, which felt like being 'in the arena'. Both the preparation

for and delivery at the stand-ups was stressful and the intensity and degree of concentration required often left me exhausted. However, I chose to retain my composure and convey calmness at all times and this is something that many people valued and remember. As the old leadership adage goes, 'people won't remember what you said or did; they will remember how you made them feel'.

A fourth important lesson was how to deal with the media's favourite 'F-bomb' – failure. This word is applied to anything that doesn't go perfectly, even in the

rather, they are people who are highly aware of the boundaries of their physical, mental and emotional wellbeing and they take active steps to manage within those boundaries.

These were my personal leadership lessons, but there were a number of other important takeaways at a system level that should inform our approach to future public service leadership, and our planning for responses to future crises. I will run through these briefly.

- Preparation is important, but excellent decision making is essential: as the

## Resilience is a key leadership attribute, and the pandemic taught me that resilient people are not those who 'just keep going' ...

---

situation of a pandemic where there was huge uncertainty and no operating manual. After the first high-profile hitch in our pandemic response, I took the position that rather than the event being a problem in itself, the only failure is the failure to review, learn and improve. This doesn't mean dodging accountability – in fact, a key part of building and maintaining public trust during the pandemic response was acknowledging what had happened when things didn't go as well as they could or should have – but ensuring that the focus is on reviewing and learning. This is the approach that the airline industry has taken to improving safety over many decades, and it also underpins quality improvement in health care. Fundamental to this is a focus on the system rather than the individual (even if the common response of the media is to call for a resignation).

A fifth Covid-19 leadership lesson was the importance of looking after yourself and your people. This was especially important during the relentless and high-stakes response to the pandemic, but it is apposite to leadership in all circumstances. Resilience is a key leadership attribute, and the pandemic taught me that resilient people are not those who 'just keep going';

results of the Global Health Security Index demonstrate, preparation and planning are important but having agreed decision-making structures and processes in place and testing these beforehand is critical. It doesn't matter how prepared a jurisdiction is on paper; it is of little value without strong, values-based leadership and evidence-informed decision making.

- Having agreed shared objectives: at the start of the pandemic there was some debate about public health outcomes versus the economy, but it soon became clear that the best economic and social response was a strong public health response. This then informed a unified approach across government.
- Flexibility and agility: one of the reasons New Zealand's pandemic response was successful is that we were able to adjust it 'on the fly' on the basis of new information, evidence or empirical learning.
- The need to deliver for marginalised and vulnerable groups: we clearly didn't always do this as well as we should have, but avoided 'failure' by learning and adjusting. There were some remarkable results achieved in both outbreak management and vaccination.

- Communities have enormous capability and capacity to look after themselves if we listen, provide them with good information and resources, and let them take the lead.
  - If you look after staff and, in particular, 'have their back' when mistakes are made, you will get huge discretionary effort.
  - Communication is absolutely critical to an effective crisis response: one of the first things we should do in
  - Healthy level of imposter syndrome (self-doubt)
  - Lifetime learner and lifetime teacher (i.e. is curious and doesn't have 'ownership rights' on knowledge or information)
  - 'Constructive disruptive'
  - Keeps wellbeing high (to maintain high resilience)
  - Knows when to exit
- I think these attributes are all apposite to public service leaders both now and in

## The more proactive approach used by the Defence Force, as well as approaches used in the public service in other places, such as the UK, provide useful pointers for New Zealand.

---

response to a significant event is put in place a full communications response that reaches into all communities through a range of channels right from the start.

### Future leaders

So what does all this mean for future leaders in the public service? The short answer is that the future is now; the leaders we need in the future are the leaders we need now. So it is perhaps more a matter of emphasis than anything else.

I want to start with a list of attributes of future directors, compiled from feedback from participants in recent advanced directors' courses run by the New Zealand Institute of Directors. This is a 'work in progress' and I want to acknowledge Carol Scholes from the institute for the list and her agreement for me to share it.

### *Advanced directors' courses list of leadership attributes*

- Big picture thinking and aware of impact of wider events on their organisation
- Decisive in ambiguity
- Assumes the best (optimism)
- Aware of biases

future, so it's a great starting point. I would like to suggest seven additional attributes; all are important now and will be even more so in future.

### *Essential public service leadership attributes*

- The best leaders are those who do the basics well, and arguably the most basic and important task of leaders is effective communication. Communication is a two-way process which starts with listening, so public service leaders need to create opportunities to do just that, in particular with marginalised and vulnerable groups and communities. Public service leaders need to be able to communicate honestly with the public to build trust; it's no coincidence that the words 'trust' and 'truth' originate from the same linguistic root. Of course, being able to communicate is one thing; having the opportunities to do so is another. A significant change I noticed during my public service career was a move away from public servants fronting issues, including those of a technical nature (except perhaps when things have gone wrong). Incidentally, this change has occurred in parallel with the rise and rise

of the political advisor. This did change during the Covid response, where there was a very obvious blend of political and technical communication with the public, in particular during the daily stand-ups during outbreaks. Of course it is fully appropriate for governments, and ministers especially as the decision makers, to develop and front the narrative. However, I think it's also important for government departments, through their chief executive, to be able to, and be seen to, help lead the agenda of the government of the day.

- A deep understanding of the public service and its role in ensuring governments can deliver on their agenda, and as stewards of essential public institutions and democracy itself.
- I've mentioned the perception and reality of the gap between good policy and issues leadership and the ability to deliver. Future public service leaders should have a strong understanding of, and preferably experience in, programme implementation and operational delivery.
- A very good understanding of te ao Māori and good working knowledge of te reo, including a moderate level of listening comprehension and the ability hold a basic conversation. This is a huge leadership opportunity for public service leaders in Aotearoa. They will need to know not only how to work in partnership with Māori at a range of levels, but be comfortable and accomplished in doing so.
- Strong knowledge of the drivers of socio-economic and cultural inequities in New Zealand, including the role of racism in creating and sustaining these.
- Public service leaders should be able to make connections readily across different areas of policy and practice, not just in their areas of expertise. Collaboration across sectors should be the norm and be 'rewarded'. Leaders should take pride in being well informed on wider local, national and global issues and the implications of these for their organisation and sector, and for New Zealand as a whole.
- Specific training in coaching and mentoring and developing other leaders and staff. Good leaders are excellent at skills transfer to help ensure people have

the same opportunity they did, as part of succession planning, and to ensure that the organisation can function well if they are not there.

#### What else is required to develop future leaders?

Leading in the public service is a huge privilege, always challenging but richly rewarding. Excellent future public service leaders will be essential for our country to continue flourishing and to address existing socio-economic and ethnic inequities.

Looking back on my public service career, I was fortunate to have a number of great mentors and bosses who facilitated a range of opportunities for me and supported and encouraged me as I took those on. But there was also a significant element of chance and, in many respects, I had to forge my own path.

It's reasonable to expect senior leaders to take the initiative on their career development, seek advice and look for opportunities to develop new skills and experience. However, I wonder if the current approach could be strengthened with:

- more systematic recruitment into and development of people in the public sector;
- organised investment in people to develop leadership skills; and
- closer oversight and nurturing of a cohort of potential future senior leaders.

This might also include more careful 'curation' of people's careers to ensure

exposure to the range of experiences needed to develop the leadership qualities required. This is happening to some extent with coordination across ministries and departments on recruiting some graduates, and the Public Service Commission has career boards that look to link individuals with opportunities across the public sector.

While there is no 'right' balance between self-direction and system involvement and oversight, I think there is an opportunity for a more systematic approach to leadership selection and development. I am always struck by the significant investment that the Defence Force makes in developing its leaders and I observed the benefits of this during the pandemic response while working closely with a series of excellent leaders, especially in the leadership of the managed isolation and quarantine services. The more proactive approach used by the Defence Force, as well as approaches used in the public service in other places, such as the UK, provide useful pointers for New Zealand.

#### Concluding comments

In conclusion, I want to reiterate the importance of values-based leadership in the public service. As Sully comments in his book: 'For me, there is no effective way to cope with the ambiguity and complexity so prevalent today unless one has a clear set of values' (ibid., p.6).

The values that underpin the public service – impartial, accountable, trustworthy, responsive and respectful – provide a strong basis for coping with the world we live in. And they should be

reflected in the behaviour of public service leaders at all times: in their organisations; when working collaboratively and with shared purpose across the public sector; when interacting with ministers; and certainly when engaging with and listening to stakeholders and communities. The challenge for any leader is to do so consistently; leadership is a full- not part-time occupation.

The pandemic has provided very useful lessons for public service leaders today and in the future. Overall, I think it's reasonable to conclude that public service leaders stepped up to the challenge and did a good job. Other data indicate that our public service is comparatively transparent, effective and trusted. But none of these can be taken for granted.

There are clearly opportunities to strengthen implementation of policy initiatives and to work more closely with communities throughout the development of and delivery on government policy, particularly that designed to address ongoing major societal challenges, including inequities between groups. This will require more deliberate investment in developing and nurturing public service leaders – an investment that is not only worthwhile but essential if Aotearoa is to be a great place to live and thrive for everyone.

<sup>1</sup> The index, which ranks 180 countries and territories by their perceived levels of public sector corruption according to experts and businesspeople, uses a scale of 0 to 100, where 0 is highly corrupt and 100 is very clean.

#### References

- Acumen (2020) *Trust in New Zealand: the Acumen Edelman Trust Barometer 2020*, <https://acumennz.com/the-acumen-edelman-trust-barometer/2020/>
- Acumen (2022) *Trust in New Zealand: the Acumen Edelman Trust Barometer 2022*, <https://acumennz.com/the-acumen-edelman-trust-barometer/2022/>
- Blavatnik School of Government (2019) 'InCiSE', <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/about/partnerships/international-civil-service-effectiveness-index-2019>
- Edelman (2022) *2022 Edelman Trust Barometer*, <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2022-trust-barometer>
- GHS Index (2019) *Global Health Security Index*, <https://www.ghsindex.org>
- Lennox, J. (2017) Comment by John Lennox, Emeritus Professor of Mathematics, Oxford University, author's notes from the Oxford Strategic Leadership Programme, November 2017
- Public Service Commission (2022) 'Rangahao o Kiwis Count', 22 October, <https://www.publicservice.govt.nz/research-and-data/kiwis-count/>
- Sullenberger, C. (2016) *Making a Difference: stories of vision and courage from America's leaders*, New York: Harper Collins
- Transparency International (2021) *Corruption Perceptions Index*, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021>
- World Economic Forum (2022) 'Edelman Trust Barometer: cycle of distrust threatens action on global challenges', 18 January, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/01/edelman-trust-barometer-2022-report/>