

Letter from America - contrasting Las Vegas with Brighton.

Day 1

Greetings from Las Vegas.

I'm writing from the IPMA (International Public Management Association) HR conference being hosted in the world famous Flamingo Hotel on the Strip in Las Vegas.

The scale of things here is very different from the UK and the conference centre in the Flamingo Hotel is absolutely vast - I thought the facilities provided by Brighton were big but facilities in America can only be described as gargantuan! If only we had this sort of resource at our disposal in the UK. The conference centre is not huge but they also have lavish technological resource such as business centres with Internet link - which is where I'm sending this blog from.

Today is pre-conference warm up time and sees two main workshops. One on arbitration - this caused me a wry smile given the state of the Local Government pay deal back in the UK! The other - which I'm about to go off to is on competence-based pay systems. Equally a subject that has vexed us much in the UK and no doubt will also be troubling our American colleagues as it's big on their agenda. I suspect cracking the nut of competency and pay is something of a worldwide holy grail for HR people.

It's the president's opening address tonight. I hope Pam Kannady does as good a job as Stephen (Moir) did for us earlier this year. I'll send you all another blog tomorrow when the conference proper gets going.

Day 2

Globalisation really is shrinking the issues.

Today's keynote speaker at the IPMA HR conference in Las Vegas was Dr. Peter Capelli who spoke on the issue of talent management. Even before his keynote speech was underway, simple networking with American HR colleagues told me that the biggest, single issue (economic meltdown aside) is the ageing workforce and the demographic time bomb as a problem every bit as explosive in the US as it is the UK.

Dr Capelli spoke about the difficulties faced in the US with the baby boomer generation soon to hit retirement and the very real worries he has about the loss of knowledge as it haemorrhages into retirement. Sounds familiar doesn't it? But if you think about these issues I think they simply reflect the fact that the world really is a smaller place with the globalisation of the economy and the huge impact the Internet has had upon world communications - including leadership and management issues.

Other familiar themes from Dr Capelli's keynote speech brought a smile to my lips. The public sector in the US is grappling with huge discrepancy in performance in its workforce. The management of performance and the fulcrum between pay and rewards is a subject that causes the US public administration much vexation. How can managers become more competent to lead and motivate their teams to improve overall performance and deliver excellent services to the public? There has been a significant trend for US public sector organisations to hire in talent rather than grow and develop their own - particularly at a senior executive level. How close is this last question to our hearts and the recent high-

profile news about our very own Town Hall, so-called 'fat cats' (see my recent blog entry on this subject)?

What did shock me is that out of all US public sector organisations who are associates of the IPMA 63% undertake no workforce planning, or succession strategies, at all. This is where the globalisation issue seemed to go off script to me. However, Dr Capelli said that he has estimated that only about 25% of workforce plans actually yielded any gain and that forecasting the future needs of organisations is notoriously difficult to achieve.

Dr Capelli ended his keynote address by discussing retention strategies and he considered that the single biggest factor in employees staying with an employer is social networks and the relationship with their manager. Here, we seemed to get back on message and again how familiar does this research sound to that we've undertaken in the UK? I'm sure there's UK based research from MORI that concluded the single biggest reason for employees intending to quit is the relationship (or lack of it) with their boss.

Although I might be over 5,000 miles away from home at the moment the HR issues could be right next door.

Day 3 I have a dream...

Today's key note speaker at the IPMA-HR conference was Dr Dennis Kimbro. He spoke with a passion and enthusiasm that I have rarely heard before. Very American, and very inspirational - reminiscent of Martin Luther King. In fact so much so that he received a standing ovation at the end of his keynote speech that lasted in excess of five minutes...that was the power of his message and the impact he had on us, his recipients.

Dr Kimbro spoke on to the subject of what makes great people great? This was real evangelist stuff delivered in a style of someone who speaks naturally in CAPITAL letters. Dr Kimbro's voice truly boomed through the auditorium - this was no place for slumber, or to catch forty winks in the corner. At 8am this was a sure fire way to shake off the last vestiges of sleep.

To do Dr Kimbro's speech justice in a simple blog sent back to the UK is a truly tough act to follow. But here goes...

Dr Kimbro listed the key factors that makes great people great:

- Passion
- Shooting for the stars (not even the top of the mountain)
- Work hard...really hard
- Know that success is statistical
- Build your knowledge (dedicate yourself to lifelong learning)
- Get over failure (do this quickly)

To be a great leader we need differentiation. We must stand out from the crowd and to accomplish differentiation we need to focus on a few key elements:

- develop your skill set
- galvanise your team
- always remain committed to the bottom line (in our case our service delivery)

As HR professionals Dr Kimbro extols us to remember three key questions when selecting truly great people to join our organisation:

- What are your talents?
- Why have you selected this organisation?
- If we don't hire you what are we going to miss?

With real pearls of wisdom Dr Kimbro told us that one of the rarest talents is an ability to recognise ability in others. Most people look good on paper but what are they really going to be like when they do the job?

Continuing the leadership theme Dr Kimbro said, "...you've got to have goals and dreams or life isn't very exciting and has no purpose. Don't be average, no one remembers the average person. Find your area of excellence and work on it. Everyone has something that comes easy to them but difficult to other people - this is your unfair competitive advantage."

Finally Dr Kimbro imparted another truly insightful quote into leadership and greatness,

"It is how the person responds to the circumstance that will eventually be the determining factor in whether that individual fails or succeeds. Ultimately you are responsible for you...no one else is"

This was like having a hair dryer on full blast for an hour and a half - full in the face. If this didn't motivate then you might as well pack up and go home.

Day 4

Breaking down the boundaries.

Colleagues - this is my last blog from America before flying back home from the American IMPA-HR conference. The experience of international travel is interesting when compared to the world of work...you have to be security checked, you have to have *bona fide* ID and you have to cross international boundaries sometimes to get to your eventual destination.

Coming to a conference like this helps you to see life and work in a different perspective as - once you've crossed those boundaries - you meet likeminded people, dealing with the same wicked (*) problems, and looking to provide the best possible public service to their communities.

Today's IPMA-HR keynote speech was delivered by Dr Donald Kettl...yes that's without an 'e'. As interesting as the spelling of his surname was the content of his keynote address (*) 'Making Government work in an era of wicked problems'. Dr Kettl's hypothesis was that Government in the US, but also internationally, is in the midst of a massive transition and the whole issue of public governance is becoming exponentially complex. Naturally, the people we need to operate within this complex, and sometimes chaotic, environment require even higher-level skills, knowledge and abilities to tackle the issues they are confronted with...a tough ask for the HR department.

Dr Kettl further expounded that there's a rise in wicked problems - hard to forecast and sometimes difficult to deal with. In US terms he cited 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, and the crash in the economy. As those international boundaries begin to melt away we too in the UK can identify with some of these wicked problems - certainly on our side of the Pond we've felt the cold blast of the economic downturn and we've had 7/7 - our own version of 9/11 - even if

not within the same scale of human suffering. Dr Kettl continued his hypothesis by saying these wicked problems arise unexpectedly, give you little time to react and yet the cost of failure to deal with the (wicked) problem can be very high indeed.

Returning to the boundary theme Dr Kettl reflected upon whether Government's boundaries match the problem or - in fact - on occasions only serve to compound the problem. Organisational boundaries can inhibit an effective response. This made me think about our own governance issues and problems - what better example than the Victoria Climbié tragedy where a child dies because of the complexity of our governance arrangements and how these only served to contribute to the loss of life? See Dr Kettl's comment above - '...the cost of failure to deal with the (wicked) problem can be very high indeed'.

However, Dr Kettl didn't just provide us with a litany of problems - he gave us an insight into the solutions to deal with the wicked problems...

- Create an agile system that can be levered to respond to the problem
- Wicked problems require collaboration across the traditional boundaries
- Develop HR strategies and systems that support these agile methods of service delivery
- Focus on the problem to be solved
- Identify the capacities needed
- Pull together the resources needed with the right capacity
- Ultimately its results not rules that matter

...And on my return to the UK I'm going to be in the midst of developing a response to the prospect of an influenza pandemic. There are obvious lessons to be learned.

See you over the borderline.

Dean Shoemith
Vice President (Elect)