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The new reality of visible leadership

Sunita Patel outlines how the need for community cohesion has presented an important challenge for today's local leaders, and is affecting the way we recruit, support and retain them

Community cohesion is not a niche policy area or an optional extra. As highlighted in this week's *News Analysis* (see p10-11), our survey of senior local government leaders shows that community cohesion cuts across the whole organisation – communications and reputation, community safety and policing partnerships, equalities, democratic governance, workforce wellbeing, and organisational culture.

What has changed is not the importance of cohesion, but the nature of the leadership challenge it creates.

Senior leaders now operate in environments shaped by political polarisation, heightened scrutiny, and national and international debates that play out locally. Cohesion is no longer something that can be quietly managed in the background. It is shaped by what residents can see and hear – and by whether leaders are willing and supported enough to lead visibly. That shift has profound implications for how we recruit, support, and retain senior leaders.

A fragile moment and a narrow tightrope

Communities continue to come together in extraordinary ways. Through culture and the arts – a local festival, a community exhibition, or a shared celebration of identity – people find belonging and pride. Through sport, whole towns unite behind teams or events. In moments of tragedy or loss, when someone well-loved passes away or after an emergency, communities often respond with compassion, generosity and solidarity. There is real strength, power and beauty in that response.

And yet, cohesion can feel like walking a tightrope. Without realising it, sentiment can shift quickly. One incident, one decision, one

rumour – it can tip the balance, leaving some residents feeling unheard, others targeted, and many suddenly more vulnerable. Mandy Bishop, chief executive of North Somerset Council, captured this perfectly when she said: 'We're facing disruptive behaviour more frequently, calling for constant and close monitoring, requiring us to be fleet of foot to provide timely reassurance and to address misinformation.'

The reality is it doesn't take a lot for community cohesion to tip over, and the margin between cohesion and fracture feels narrower than ever.

Leadership has become more visible and more personal

The survey found that nearly three quarters of respondents have seen a rise in community tensions over the past year, with national political rhetoric making cohesion harder to manage. Leaders spoke candidly about fear of personal attack, social media scrutiny, and being accused of 'taking sides' just for doing their job.

These are not abstract concerns. They affect leaders' sense of safety, their families and their willingness to step into visible roles. Several respondents described operating in an environment where the personal cost of visibility feels far higher than it once did. From a recruitment perspective, this matters. We are asking more of senior leaders than ever – emotionally, politically and personally – yet too often we assess them with frameworks designed for a very different leadership landscape.

Technical experience is no longer enough

Policy and process alone cannot absorb risk. People do.

As Shokat Lal, chief executive of Sandwell

MBC, said: 'It should be a prerequisite as you recruit people in senior leadership positions that they have a really good understanding about the communities that they serve.'

The leaders who navigate cohesion challenges most effectively are not always those with the longest CVs. They are the ones who understand place – who can read the room, hold ambiguity and communicate with empathy as well as authority. Political skills (with a small 'p') are increasingly essential. This is not about party politics. It is about judgement, timing, tone and knowing how to lead without inflaming or retreating.

Why this matters for leadership and recruitment

Community cohesion cannot be something councils focus on only when things go wrong, or ahead of elections. It needs to sit at the centre of how leadership is understood, exercised and supported. Leaders are now being asked to operate where emotion, identity, misinformation and national politics collide locally. Doing this well requires far more than procedural confidence.

It requires values, judgement, emotional intelligence and the ability to communicate calmly and clearly under pressure. It requires leaders who understand their communities, can read the temperature of their place and are prepared to lead visibly – even when that carries personal risk.

Recruitment decisions shape organisational confidence

The survey also highlights the importance of alignment between political and corporate leadership. Where alignment exists, councils act decisively and communicate consistently. Where it doesn't, hesitation becomes visible,

and public confidence suffers. Senior appointments send powerful signals about what an organisation values – whether leaders are comfortable behind the scenes, or prepared to explain difficult decisions, challenge misinformation and reinforce shared values.

Retention matters just as much. Leaders who feel exposed but unsupported will disengage or leave. Those who feel trusted, backed and aligned are far more likely to stay and lead with confidence.

Rethinking assessment and support

From an executive search perspective, the findings reinforce the need to look beyond checklists and competency frameworks. We focus on how candidates:

- Make sense of complexity and moral tension
- Communicate under scrutiny
- Navigate disagreement without inflaming it
- Build trust across political, organisational and community boundaries

This requires deeper, values-led assessment, and clients willing to be honest about the realities of the role. Support does not stop at appointment – coaching, mentoring, peer networks and visible organisational backing are essential retention tools.

Community cohesion is fragile, but it is not accidental. It is shaped every day by the tone leaders set, the behaviour they model and the confidence they have to lead visibly and humanly. ■

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