

Deep Learning for Hard Times

How the ADVANCE programme took leadership mentoring to a new level



Contents

Words

Between 2014 and 2017, Marsaili Cameron and Sheila Marsh of PublicServiceWorks carried out an independent impact study of ADVANCE, a mentoring programme delivered by a group of senior volunteer mentors for chief executives of local charities in The Carers Trust Network. This is a summary of the full report that can be found at:

<https://professionals.carers.org/advance-mentoring-scheme>

or

www.publicserviceworks.com/resources-and-downloads

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Lead mentor

Hilary Samson-Barry, Koru Leadership Ltd
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Mentors

Over the three years of the programme, 44 mentors gave generously of their time, knowledge and skills. Without them, the programme would not have been possible.

The booklet at a glance

What is it for?

Continuing austerity in the public sphere has led to relentless pressure on organisations of all kinds to re-invent themselves. But today's leaders honed their skills and developed their know-how in very different times. Old rules have evaporated, and new ones are not yet clear. It's easy to feel under siege and out of control. How can board members and chief executives learn to re-interpret their leadership role to fit a drastically changing world?

This publication tells the story of an innovation that broke the isolation of leaders and, over 12 months, enabled them to enhance their confidence and skills in order to regain control of their lives and their organisations. There is much to be learned from their experience.

Where does it come from?

Does it surprise you that this successful innovation originated in the voluntary sector? Much has been said about the need for statutory and not-for-profit organisations to learn lessons from the private sector. But the intense pressures on voluntary organisations in recent years are resulting in some radical home-grown re-thinking and re-invention.

This initiative was developed by Carers Trust, a major UK charity specifically concerned with addressing the needs of **unpaid** carers. The leaders of local charities in The Carers Trust Network across the UK were offered the opportunity to participate in ADVANCE, a dynamic mentoring programme delivered by a group of senior volunteer mentors.

Who is it for?

- Leadership of voluntary organisations and charities facing major challenges to their sustainability.
- Human resource professionals supporting leaders in all sectors.
- Those making decisions about support to charitable organisations through grants, contracts and commissioning.

How can you use it?

The booklet highlights findings from an independent impact study on ADVANCE, commissioned by Carers Trust and carried out by researchers from PublicServiceWorks. Significant implications for leadership and organisation development extend well beyond the immediate area of research. A series of cards in the back flap invites chief executives, board members, mentors and others to work separately and together in a focused way to ensure effective strategic leadership.

The big picture: return on investment

The ADVANCE programme was launched on a far from calm sea. Local charities supporting unpaid carers faced profound challenges:

- Survival in a climate of large-scale cuts and new demands from public sector commissioners.
- Daily increases in the need for support for unpaid carers of all ages.
- Different expectations of their roles for chief executives and trustees who had taken on the job in very different times.

Some charities were successfully tackling these challenges. But organisations learning how to re-invent themselves for a changing world had few support resources, either local or national.

ADVANCE was designed to address this lack, and to enable leaders to develop and hone the insights and skills they needed for successful re-invention. It was a new kind of support, where volunteer senior mentors from different sectors worked with chief executives of local charities over a 12-month period. A pilot programme was a huge success, and the full ADVANCE programme began in 2014, open to any chief executive, singly or in a small group.

ADVANCE recruited 44 senior mentors and, crucially, a lead mentor. An innovative learning community was nurtured, supporting the mentors and their contribution to the programme. Participating charity leaders were helped to focus on the key decisions and actions needed for their organisations to (continue to) provide sustainable support locally for unpaid carers.

Three highlights illustrate the key impact of ADVANCE. The final report of the impact study offers full supporting evidence – see link on inside front cover.

1 Making a difference to what counts

Charities participating in ADVANCE proved more likely to be thriving compared to the Network overall. Impact was tracked in three vital arenas:

- 1. Self-confidence/leadership in the chief executive being mentored.**
- 2. How they developed their charity as an organisation.**
- 3. How they worked more effectively within the external environment.**

To achieve this, chief executives prioritised mentoring work on: sustainability, governance and partnership/collaboration.

2 Creating critical mass for learning and change

106 chief executives from England and Wales took part, fully two thirds of The Carers Trust Network's leadership there. What participants learned and put into practice had long-lasting positive effects on carers, staff, trustees and local partners. ADVANCE became a trusted brand – one of the most highly valued services Carers Trust provided. And the mentors represent a quality resource for the future, showing new and high value ways to work with volunteers.

3 Bringing in substantial investment

At a time of huge pressure on budgets, Carers Trust leveraged pro bono volunteer support worth around £2.5m or £24,000 per participant. This attracted grant funding of £500,000 in addition, covering the costs of supporting the programme and the impact study over three and a half years.

The ADVANCE programme in a nutshell

In the external environment

Commissioning changes in carer support; New care legislation; Increasing carer needs; Cost pressures; Demand for sustainability; New business approaches

Why was change needed?

For local charity chief executives

Operational and time pressures; Challenges working with their boards; Pressure on current business models, e.g. workforce, performance, regulation; Tensions and opportunities with mergers/partnerships in and outside Carers Trust; Few realistic opportunities for chief executive development

ADVANCE programme

12 months mentoring support for local charity chief executives, individually and/or in a group

What was done?

ADVANCE programme

With 44 volunteer senior mentors and lead mentor creating a learning community

Outcomes for leaders

New ways of thinking and doing; Confidence-building for strategic leadership

Outcomes for the charities

Improved sustainability; Strengthened governance; Partnerships/collaboration

What were the results?

Outcomes for carers

Sustained support; More creative support; Continuity

Outcomes for Carers Trust

£3m investment; Critical mass for change; New resources; ADVANCE as a trusted brand for support

How/why did ADVANCE help?

Support **and** challenge for individuals
Mentors with the right senior/business experience and credibility, working in a learning community
Structured yet flexible mentee-centred scheme
Increased confidence and capacity to do what organisations needed to thrive in the difficult context

Learning fast but learning deep

'At first I thought: why would I need mentoring? We'd just won a big contract, for goodness sake. But when I met my mentor, and started working with her, I realised I'd got the wrong end of the stick. She really appreciated the success we'd had, but she knew that, equipped with some new skills and ways of thinking, we could do much, much more.'

A turning point for many participants in ADVANCE was the realisation that mentoring was about success, not failure. Co-learning with a senior peer was a new experience for people who in many cases felt isolated because of their own senior position. They knew that they and their organisations faced huge challenges; but there were few people they could confide in and learn from.

'Learning on the run' through mentoring enabled these local leaders to reinvent how they thought and worked. Fundamental to the process was their mentor as 'critical friend' or 'outside eye':

'The best thing was to have a critical friend – to have someone else's eye on your business, reviewing it in a friendly fashion. [...] Criticism was never given in a negative way; it always had a positive spin.'

The impact study showed how most participants began the mentoring year focused on organisational issues. As the year progressed, they gradually shifted focus to personal development – in other words, how they could work differently to meet organisational priorities. By the year end, they recognised the depth of learning and benefits both for themselves and for the organisation – and, importantly, for the wider system of support for carers.

Chief executives starting to work with their mentors very rapidly reported major gains: the confidential mentoring ended their sense of isolation and helped them better focus their energies.

'The most significant feature for me was to have someone there only for me – either to see in person or to speak to on the phone. Someone who had no other axe to grind with the organisation.'

In the pressurised environments they faced, achieving deep learning rapidly helped keep them engaged in their mentoring, despite the difficulty of carving out the time for it.

The ADVANCE programme helped participants play to their strengths, taking an 'asset based' approach so they could adapt to radically different demands and scenarios. ADVANCE built on strengths for individual chief executives, for their organisations, for partnership groups and for The Carers Trust Network as a whole.

Five illustrated cards (Cards 1-5) sum up their learning in a visual way. They are included at the back of this publication, along with ideas for using them, and an interactive presentation based on them is available here: <https://professionals.carers.org/advance-mentoring-scheme>

Impact of learning fast and learning deep

- Becoming a CEO, i.e. making strategic decisions, delegating not drowning...
- Noticing your second thoughts as opposed to your first reactions
- Skills in reflection and strategic thinking
- Better training and development
- More motivated trustees with clearer roles
- Clear direction of travel for organisation
- Stronger finances/clarity about future contracting



- Carer support retained despite pressures
- More support in more places
- More consistent, fuller information
- Staff motivated so less turnover = continuity
- More creative offerings
- Seen as a serious player
- Handling tricky meetings and networking confidently
- Managing merger approaches
- Putting effort into partnerships

What leaders learnt...

Both highly experienced and newly appointed leaders reported significant impact on their understanding and skills in reflection, leadership and management.

'A confidential, independent, non-judgemental and professional perspective on challenging issues ... has helped me to work through problems and be more solution focused ... and has allowed me to let off steam about sensitive issues ... I found that I was able to deal with some very complex issues confidently.'

Mentoring gave them the space to re-work how they approached the pressures and problems of leading a local charity.

'Definitely helped me to feel much more supported ... and to have an external person validate what [we] are doing when I felt the funders were not listening to us or valuing what we did ... this has been extremely helpful and possibly contributed to enabling me to keep going without cracking up!'

Participants stressed their increased confidence to take up their full roles as strategic leaders; and appreciated reassurance that what they were doing was positive.

'A shift from the operational "down in the weeds" to the strategic – stepping into the leadership role.'

'I can take time to reflect – not giving instant answers, "just let me think on that".'

'Noticing how my first thoughts change when I've time to think...'

'Knowing I'm not out on a limb or terribly wrong.'

How this affected their organisation and external partners...

ADVANCE mentoring enabled participants to work differently with their staff, board and partners, and improve the impact of what they were doing. They discovered they had often been trapped in a 'vicious circle', overwhelmed by operational demands and with no time left to develop strategic direction. This risked the organisation's sustainability.

The changes participants made in how they worked with staff and board produced 'ripple effect' benefits in the organisation, where new ways of thinking and doing introduced by the mentor made their way into staff groups and other forums.

'The mentor model is a way of working with staff outside of the normal performance management model.'

ADVANCE participants opened up discussion of changes, improved business planning and tried new ways of working. Mentoring helped them ask better questions. It came as a surprise to many that asking better questions and encouraging your staff to ask them could be so helpful. Many had been trading in quick answers, believing that these mark out a good leader. But the ever-changing external environment for local charities means that to continue to be successful, skilled leaders must formulate and ask searching questions. The support of mentors was much appreciated here.

'A safe space to consider options and ... see ways in which I could do better in my work with the chair/board and senior colleagues – clarity about the importance of this work for the future of the organisation is reassuring ... building my confidence.'

'I was given some really excellent business advice, particularly around organisational risk and risk planning.'

Mentoring helped chief executives get better at juggling the many tensions they face: often pulled to one side or the other of difficult situations with partners, commissioners, staff and trustees. Mentoring helped them acknowledge that they could juggle effectively only by paying attention to **both** horns of any dilemma. ADVANCE mentors supported chief executives in working with tensions continuously rather than looking for one-off solutions. They needed to be able to respond constructively and avoid the danger zone of one-dimensional thinking. Juggling, they came to realise, is the new norm.

How did all this affect carers?

In a context of formidable cuts, carers¹ benefited from:

- Services being sustained or even being expanded in a creative way.
- Continuity of support – since staff were motivated to continue working for the charity.
- The opening up of new opportunities for support through the collaboration of different charities and funders.

1. Carers were the ultimate beneficiaries of ADVANCE. But other organisations, of course, could expect similar benefits for their beneficiaries – whether they are called, for example, clients, customers, or patients.

How one mentoring relationship worked: a conversation looking back...

Scene: Charity office in a market town

Dramatis personae:

CE chief executive of local charity

M ADVANCE mentor

C chair of trustees

CE At the start, we were drowning! We were so taken up by sorting out the new process for staff contracts. Nightmare.

M Well, you had to do it. But I was glad when it was over and we could move on to other things.

CE But for me you were 100 per cent there with us. All those phone calls helping us out with HR issues.

M Well, you had to focus on being the CEO – building trust and behaving consistently. And you got your reward – positive staff feedback on the process.

C Which left us with looking at the trustees – the issue that you'd raised in the first place. I knew that I was doing a lot and that other trustees had rather sat back...

M Something you said made me ask you more. It seemed you felt you should be grateful for having a full quota of trustees – but, in practice, they made little contribution. I was clear that you two could not run this business alone. Could the

trustees be persuaded that they had to behave a bit more like non-executive directors of a business?

CE I would have said, 'No way!' But it was a wake-up call for us all. I was very glad that you agreed to facilitate a meeting with the trustees. They're now putting their hands up to do things more. And we have a code of conduct.

M And you've got to grips now with costing your services.

C Charging for services has been a huge change for us as a charity. Can we really build on this to reduce our dependence on the local authority? It's all right – I'm not expecting you to answer that...

One strategic thinker is good but a hub for learning is better

A key question for the researchers studying ADVANCE was:

How is it that a programme focusing on one-to-one relationships, conducted on a basis of confidentiality, can bring about far-reaching benefits of the kind outlined on pages 2-3?

A large part of the answer lay in the impetus ADVANCE provided to chief executives and boards to raise their game in terms of **joined-up thinking** and **strategic leadership**. Intense day-to-day pressures had resulted in many local leaders finding themselves buried in operational detail, raising their heads only to get a fix on the next incoming crisis.

ADVANCE encouraged them to look forwards to a challenging but potentially rewarding future instead of remaining ensnared in the past. And they started to look sideways too. Instead of seeing themselves as isolated oases of good practice in a hostile desert landscape, they began to think about how entering into collaborative arrangements with other organisations could open up new opportunities for local carers.

Given some head space by the programme, chief executives and chairs expressed a wide range of individual concerns, from the preparation of bids to succession planning. But across the UK there was also striking consensus on the most significant – and most stubborn – challenges.

Participants were eager to engage with their mentor and with others in learning how to tackle more effectively the following three priorities:

- Creating organisational (and personal) **sustainability**.
- On a foundation of **strong governance**.
- With openness to **partnership and collaboration**.

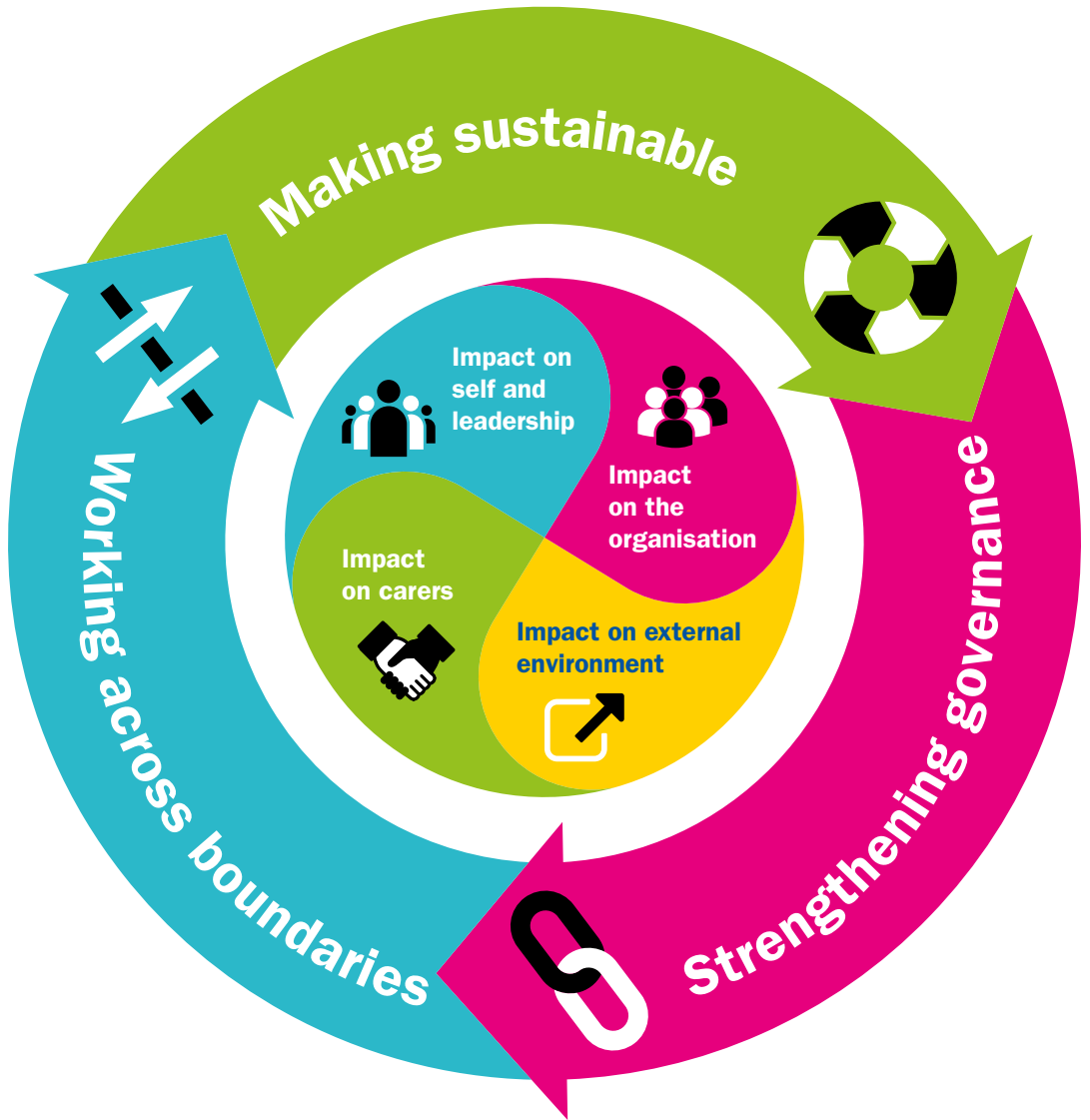
Real progress could not be made on these priorities, participants came to realise, without concerted effort from themselves as leaders. They had to learn to think differently and do things differently – and to be seen to be committed to continuous learning at all levels of the organisation.

The impact study showed that work on the three priorities had a significant effect on the following key components of strategic leadership:

- Self-confidence.
- Ability to shape the organisation.
- Ability to negotiate effectively within the external environment.

So, what did progress on the priorities look like, and how was it achieved? The following pages offer an overview. For a prompt to analysis and action for your own organisation, follow the signposting for the cards.

How learning creates action and impact



Making sustainable

Leaders of organisations under pressure often say that what they really want is sustainability. What do they mean? And are they all talking about the same thing? For example, does sustainability mean being able to do more of the same things for longer? Or, for many people, is it actually about the survival of their own organisation?

One thing is clear: stability and balance are extremely difficult to achieve when the operating environment is highly volatile and also largely unpredictable. The challenge facing chief executives in these circumstances has been likened to **re-designing an aeroplane at the same time as flying it in real time²**.

2. www.internationalfuturesforum.com/three-horizons

Through the programme, participants in ADVANCE examined what they meant by sustainability, and, as in the following vignette, explored the practical implications that flowed from their insights. Notable here is the skilled use by the mentor of what one ADVANCE participant described as a 'killer question' – a particular slant on the approach to questioning described on page 6.

Would you like to compare your perceptions of sustainability with those that emerged during ADVANCE and reflect on the implications?

See Card
A

Dropping a stone in the pool

Over years, a small charity had built up a strong reputation locally for delivering high quality home care services. The chief executive of the charity takes up the story as an ADVANCE mentor entered the picture.

'ADVANCE actually had a big impact on how we think about what we are for and what we do. The mentor, X, threw down a challenge to us that really turned round how we do things. We'd lost our way a bit. We were very focused on responding to the need for domiciliary care – that was where the funding was. The charitable side was on a bit of a backburner. From the sessions we had with X, it all turned around and over the last few years the charitable side has come to the fore.'

X came to a board meeting, sat there, listened. Then he asked, 'What makes you a charity? From what I'm hearing, you're not a charity, you're just a business.' We were taken aback! I said, 'We don't make a profit!' He asked, 'But what are you giving back?' We said, 'Well, we offer a high quality service.' He said, 'Yeah, and so do a good many private providers out there.'

This exchange really made us think. Since that time, we've taken steps to widen our sources of income so that we can make a serious contribution on the charitable side.'

Strategic leadership: the key ingredients



Strengthening governance

A mentor put her finger on one of the big challenges facing many of the chief executives who took part in ADVANCE:

'For me, the key is around working with boards to improve governance. Without a strong supportive and strategic board, organisations will struggle in the long term.'

The theory underpinning governance is relatively clear, setting out how:

- The board works to ensure the organisation operates safely and legally, and to enable sound finances and clear direction.
- The board works best with the chief executive, senior staff and partners/collaborators.

But for many participants in ADVANCE, as for chief executives and board members in other organisations, this was all much easier said than done.

Tensions abounded. Some chief executives felt intimidated by their board and duty bound to follow every expressed wish. Some boards believed that the chief executive was best positioned to make decisions and so should be backed up on every occasion. Yet other chief executives would have dearly loved a degree of challenge and new thinking from their trustees but despaired of ever getting it.

And other boards pretty much discounted the advice of the chief executive as coming from their hired help. (Yet other chief executives and boards, of course, had developed highly satisfactory and constructive relationships.)

It became clear that strengthening governance required leadership from both chief executive and board members – and that they had to develop a relationship where they both supported and challenged each other. One chief executive commented:

'My mentor has encouraged me to be more determined and demonstrate greater leadership skills when working with the board. He has given me the courage to be more assertive and present them with fewer options so they have to make decisions instead of holding endless discussions.'

The ADVANCE researchers heard in some depth about the good, the bad and the ugly at the helm of organisations. Card B invites you to explore how you and your colleagues see yourselves and each other in the governance stakes.

See Card
B

Working across boundaries

As a network organisation, with partners of widely differing sizes and histories, Carers Trust is familiar with the challenges thrown up by working across boundaries. A chief executive of a local charity spoke for many of her colleagues in ADVANCE when she commented of partnership working:

'The process has not been all plain sailing; but at the very least we know more about the motivations, priorities and direction of our partners than we did before. In a nutshell, we have been forced to face up to the differences and tensions as well as the potential. On the other hand, cracks will show up later if you don't open up and lay your cards on the table when trying to work together.'

Leading researchers in partnership working in the voluntary sector offer as the first of their top tips for collaborating: 'Don't do it unless you have to!'³ – advice that several participants in ADVANCE events received with a rueful smile. However, for many, there came a growing realisation that collaborative ways of working are often extremely useful in initiatives both inside and outside the organisation.

'Working together' with other organisations ranged from ad hoc arrangements to collaborate on tenders for contracts to joint working leading up to full merger. These situations often had in common the fact that neither chief executive nor trustees were familiar with the processes involved.

Typically, ADVANCE mentors had significant experience of collaboration, and were happy to put this at the service of the local charity. One mentor commented:

'The mentoring ... made them [two chief executives] talk one to one regularly and compare notes in a way they may not have done alone; it was a trigger or maybe more, a catalyst.'

Nearly all local leaders were aware that without trust between potential collaborators, there could be no meaningful relationships. But trust needed both time and fertile soil in which to grow – factors that were usually lacking in the pressing and highly charged circumstances that often marked the need to form partnerships.

Would you like to explore how to develop constructive collaborations in difficult circumstances, learning from the work of ADVANCE participants? Card C points the way.



See Card
C

3. Huxham, C. and Vangen, S. (2005) Managing to collaborate: the theory and practice of collaborative advantage. London: Routledge.

Is there a recipe for good learning for senior people?

This booklet shows just how much was gained from ADVANCE mentoring. It also raises the questions: What made ADVANCE special? What elements of the ADVANCE approach might usefully be tried out elsewhere, in what conditions? Crucially, what principles of ADVANCE might prove useful in the development of other vehicles for learning for senior people?

What underpinned the success of ADVANCE?

Connecting people, creating relationships and community

The programme put centre stage the importance of creating relationships and connecting people, listening to and caring about people's concerns, and seeking ideas rather than giving solutions. A co-productive 'design team' developed and led the programme. A 'lead mentor' – Hilary Samson-Barry from Koru Leadership Ltd – nurtured, cajoled and stewarded mentors in the development of a mutually supportive learning community. Learning together enabled mentors to be more confident and reflective in their mentoring. Being part of a community of this kind also met the need of experienced senior people to develop their own skills and knowledge in a stimulating but also confidential environment.

Keeping focus on both individual and organisation

Mentoring in ADVANCE was about both the individual and the organisation, rather than one or the other.

'I have learned so much about my own leadership style, and the type of leader

I aspire to be... Through the growth of the organisation and its people I have been able to develop in my own role.'

Foregrounding quality, credibility and flexibility

The quality and credibility of the programme were crucial to successful 'on-the-run' learning for senior people. Leaders of small charities, in particular, may have arrived at their positions through hard work on the frontline of service delivery rather than through climbing well-established rungs on the managerial ladder. The programme was client-led and flexible.

Taking co-production seriously

Reciprocity and co-production were hallmarks of ADVANCE, achieved by explicitly valuing mutual learning, quality thinking and co-productive working in all programme processes:

- Chief executive development, alongside development of mentors, of chairs/ trustees and design team members, was supported by the lead mentor.
- Mentoring that always asked questions helped those being mentored to set priorities and work out their own action, starting from where they were.
- A 'design team', consisting of chief executives, mentors, lead mentor, Carers Trust professionals and independent researchers, rooted its decisions in the changing needs of participants and their organisations.
- Action research on tracking impact fed in throughout ADVANCE to design team decisions and mentor development, informing and supporting learning and action.

The ADVANCE approach cake

Ingredients

- selected high calibre people and materials
- clear joint programme leadership
- senior participants both new and established but self-selected and with organisation support
- proven and stimulating ideas about learning, change and quality thinking in organisations

Utensils

- support for participants and resource people
- open inquiring approach of all involved
- spaces for gatherings

Oven temp

A warm climate for co-production, flexible, participant-led learning and listening

Handy tips

- *Do try this when pressures are severe – that's when great and fast learning is needed most*
- *Don't try this if someone wants everybody to take part regardless...*

Method

1. careful selection and continuous development of learning inputs (people and materials) to ensure credibility, trust and openness to feedback and mutual learning
2. co-productive working in programme team and in programme processes that emphasises community, reciprocity and mutual learning
3. attention to beginnings and endings of any learning process to ensure learning can happen
4. include a study of impact that can produce real-time evidence and inform practice throughout



Making the most of the research findings

This booklet highlights key findings from the impact study of ADVANCE. The cards in the flap opposite are designed to enable you to explore the implications of these findings within your own organisation. This section draws on the experience of mentors and chief executives who used the research findings to good effect throughout the programme.

The eight cards focus on:

- **Strategic leadership:** Cards A-C support leaders in reviewing their specific situations and organisations and deal with the core elements of strategic leadership that participants tackled via mentoring: making sustainable, strengthening governance and working across boundaries.
- **Learning from the mentoring:** Cards 1-5 illustrate core areas of learning and help leaders review and develop what they do in their practice.

Like any cards, they can be used in different ways. Some may be held close to the chest while you think about what the key points and questions mean for you personally. You can choose whether it would be helpful to share your thoughts with others and invite their thoughts in turn. So, for example, a chief executive or chair of a board might want to use the cards either as a set or individually in order to think through key issues before discussing them together.

Being able to refer to a shared framework can help colleagues better hear and understand each others' ideas and concerns when they meet.

The cards are also useful for involving more people. For example, after their initial discussion, chief executive and chair may choose to take ideas into a group setting: with board members, with staff or with partners or other stakeholders – or any combination. Using the cards with a group offers a chance either:

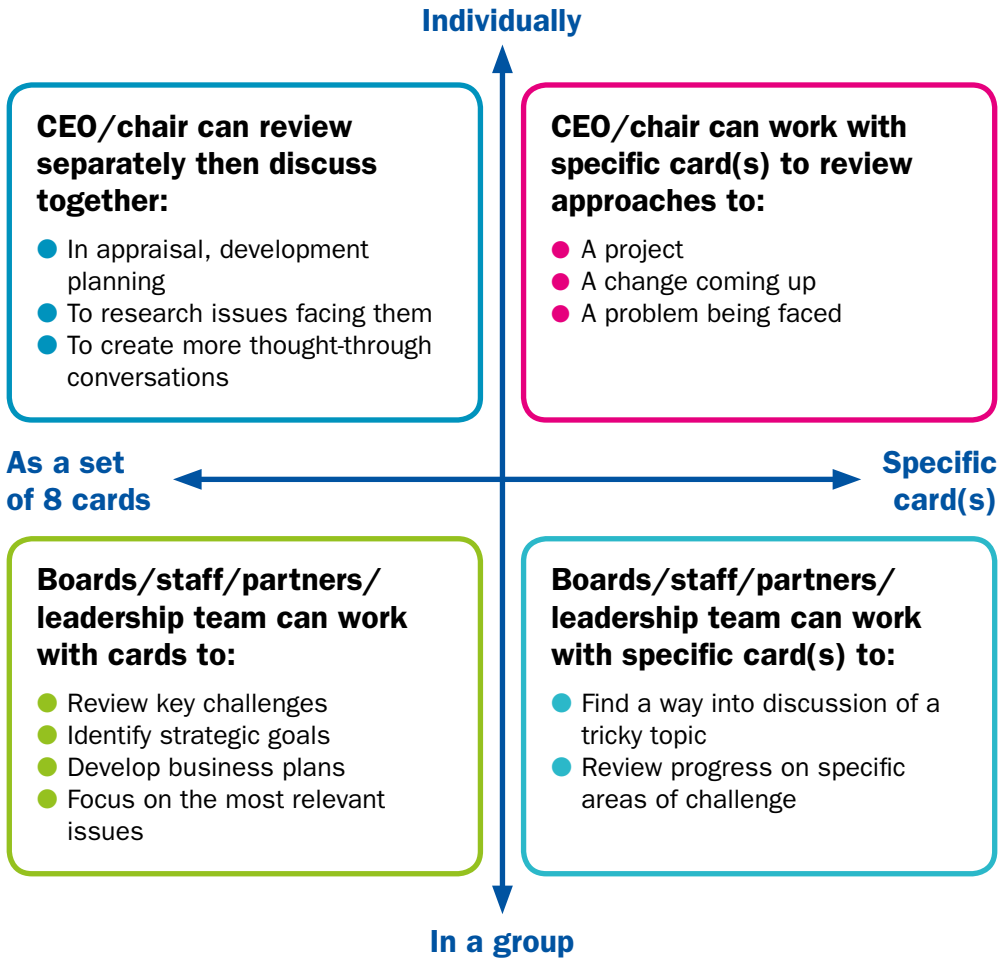
- For broad discussion aimed at agreeing a few key priorities, using questions like:

'Which of these issues are most relevant to us currently and why? Which do we need to work on first?'

- Or, when working with one or two cards, to focus on a specific topic:

'How does this card reflect aspects of what we are facing? What's missing? What can we do next? Who should we involve?'

How to use the cards



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