SOUTHEND-ON-SEA BOROUGH COUNCIL AT A GLANCE
Southend-on-Sea Borough Council is a unitary local authority located in Southend-on-Sea in Essex. It serves a population of approximately 178,000 residents. It spends £130 million a year and employs approximately 1,900 staff to provide a wide range of services to meet the needs of local people. Its aims include encouraging the prosperity of Southend and its residents, and delivering cost-effective, targeted services that meet the needs of the community.

SETTING THE CONTEXT
According to Joanna Ruffle, Head of People & Policy, the biggest challenge Southend-on-Sea Borough Council faces is reduced resources. Like many other local government organisations, the Council is focused on downsizing and on doing things differently — in the context of increased need (given current economic conditions, the council is seeing more children living in poverty and more people claiming benefits).

With the squeeze on resources, the Council is embracing new technology and new ways of doing things. Strategic leadership, Ruffle notes, is a key part of making that shift and is becoming increasingly important as the Council redefines itself and its leaders ask themselves, “What kind of council do we need to become to respond to the changing needs of our community?”

A New Kind of Leader
Ruffle notes that the organisation is moving towards a new leadership model — one that develops leaders who are resilient, adaptable, and creative in finding solutions to an increasing number of issues and problems. Ruffle sees leaders as being “absolutely critical in plotting a way where we do not have a map anymore”. To chart this challenging course, leadership across the organisation must be flexible and responsive to change.

The Engaging Leader Model
Leadership doesn’t happen in isolation — this is the guiding principle of the Council’s culture change programme, which centres on driving employee engagement. The Engaging Leader Model forms the basis of the programme, and its purpose is to help develop leaders who can engage people to do more and to try different things, and who can successfully lead across a community or geographical area. As Ruffle says: “We’re no longer leading within one organisation now. One of our senior managers, for example, is taking up a joint post with Health to look at how we integrate commissioning across health and social care because that’s where we think we can save money and improve outcomes.”

Collective Leadership
To support this new way of leading, the Council has begun working with its partners on developing leaders collectively — that is, getting people to learn alongside colleagues from different organisations. Ruffle describes this approach as “system leadership” — a way of encouraging cross-fertilisation and strong partnerships across different organisations, which Ruffle sees as being critical to the future of local services: “We’re asking, how do we lead across the whole system, rather than just our individual part of it? We’re pioneering joint integration work with health and social care by remapping the service user journey, putting the service user at the heart of it, rather than the service delivery dictating what the service user will get. We’re concentrating on health and social care, working closely with colleagues in those areas, focusing on making it work and developing a model that we can then use in other partnership arenas — for example, with the police to reduce crime and with other neighbouring local authorities to improve transport issues.”

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DESIGNING THE SOLUTION
To make the shift in culture and put the Engaging Leader Model into practice, the Council began with its middle managers. As Ruffle notes, “We lit some fires around the organisation and got some energetic and enthusiastic people working the way we needed them to work.” The Council used the Engaging Leader Model to engage staff and also to help them understand what good engagement looked like. Drawing on data from a staff engagement survey, Council leaders were able to identify managers who were highly engaging and those who needed development. As Ruffle notes, “We wanted to ensure that our managers who struggled with engaging their staff could learn from the managers who seemed to find it easy and did it as a matter of course.”

The Council’s 18 senior leaders also went through a two-day residential session during which they identified key elements of engaging leadership. Using the results of their 360 feedback and coaching sessions, they agreed the strategic areas they were going to work on as a team. What made the session so successful was having full support and participation from the chief executive, who chose to share some of his feedback with the leadership group: As Ruffle notes, “His openness and honesty about where he needed to improve then set the tone for everybody else.” Having strong, authentic leadership at the top has helped ensure the success of the Council’s engagement programme.

MAKING AN IMPACT
Since 2010, when austerity measures kicked in, the Council has reduced budgets by about 30% but has continued to offer high-quality services. As Ruffle notes: “We continue to win awards and earn regional and national recognition for what we do.”

Part of the Council’s success comes from having focused conversations with the community members about what their needs and aspirations are. Because the Council serves a diverse borough, it cannot take a “one size fits all” approach. As Ruffle notes: “We’re moving away from universal services to more targeted services. We’re thinking about how we can get community members to do more themselves and use our limited resources to target those people who are in greatest need. We’re also aligning community engagement with employee leadership engagement, because as we talk to community members and listen to what they want, we have to be able to rapidly develop our workforce to meet that need.”

LESSONS LEARNED AND ADVICE FOR OTHERS
Adapt ideas to fit your culture
Ruffle urges those beginning their leadership development journey to “go out and find lots of good ideas from elsewhere, but don’t just import them — adapt them to your culture.” She also advises “be[ing] very clear and honest about where you’re starting from so you can measure how far you’ve come”.

Remember: Leaders are here to serve
“It might sound old-fashioned,” Ruffle says, “but we see leaders as ‘servants’. I think local government lost its way when we stopped talking about being public servants — but that’s actually what we are. We’ve gone back to that basic principle: We’re here to serve the public. If we can’t buy in to that, then we shouldn’t be here.”

Keep your end goal always in sight
From the very beginning, the Council’s collective vision was clear. Ruffle says, “We wanted to create a better Southend. That powerful and compelling vision guided all our conversations. In local government particularly, we often get hung up on process, detail, and governance — all important things — but we made sure to always ask ourselves, ‘So what? How does this help the average person walking down Southend High Street?’ Because if it doesn’t help, then we need to find a different way of doing it — or we shouldn’t do it at all.”

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