The Big Society: Implications for managers
by David Grayson

The Big Society is a political idea which is being pursued by the present UK coalition government. On the other hand, it is something which cuts across the political spectrum – there are people from different political views supporting different aspects of it. So whether we like or loathe it, this is clearly something that is going to have huge implications for managers and management generally. I will start by stating what I believe is involved in the Big Society, which boils down to three principal elements:

- **Devolving power from the centre**
  It is about the attempt to devolve power from the centre to local provision and that means devolution not just from central to local government, but also to a whole range of other organisations – civil society and so on.

- **Broader range of public services providers**
  It is secondly about a much broader range of providers delivering public services.

- **Encouraging more active citizenship**
  And thirdly, it is the element of encouraging us all to be more active citizens – whether that is in terms of contributing our time or our money or our expertise, or all of the above.

**What are the implications for managers and management?**

If you accept, irrespective of whether you think it is good or bad that this concept that gets this label of Big Society is going to create all kinds of change for all three sectors – for the public sector, for business and for civil society organisations, charities, social enterprises, mutuals, voluntary organisations generally – then as managers in any of those sectors, you need to think about the implications for you and your organisation of some very substantial changes taking place around you.

**The implications for private enterprise and business**

For business one of the issues is going to be are we operating in any sectors where there are potentially chances for us to be taking on delivery of some public services as commercial propositions. One of the areas that business is thinking about is whether without necessarily endorsing all the elements of the Big Society, is the expertise which it can share with some
of the organisations that it has long term partnerships with – such as social enterprises or some major voluntary organisations.

For instance, one of the consequences of the cuts currently taking place is that quite a number of voluntary organisations are consider mergers or acquisitions. Now that needs a core skill common in the private sector but which most in the voluntary sector have never had to think about previously. So, is there potential for a transfer of skills that might be mutually beneficial for all concerned?

**Implications for government and social enterprises**

For social enterprises, one of the key implications is that there may be opportunities to take on the delivery of some of public services that are apparently going to be contracted out.

From the public sector side, there are some huge challenges in terms of cultural mind shift. Arguably, one of the real “pinch points” of this whole concept of Big Society, is, the degree to which politicians understand the scale and the intensity of the change management process and the culture change that is required to try and bring Big Society about. Government needs to appreciate that that is a very intense process which needs thorough programme-management, just like any other change management process.

So by stripping away some of the rhetoric, I have laid out what I believe to be some useful basic managerial essentials which must be addressed in facing up to the challenges ahead. The Big Society will affect managers in varying guises throughout the country.

*David Grayson is Professor of Corporate Responsibility and Director of the Doughty Centre for Corporate Responsibility, Cranfield School of Management*