



Wigan♥
Council

Mission Leadership at Wigan Council

A Guide for Leaders and Managers



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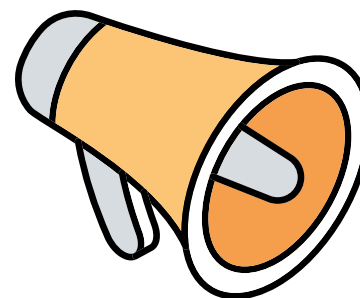
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Part One: Purpose

This guide is, above all, an invitation to personal reflection.

It is designed not to be read once and filed, but to be returned to: before a difficult meeting, in the gap between receiving feedback and deciding what to do with it, in the moments when you are honest enough to ask whether the way you led today actually matched what you believe.

Its purpose is to help you become more conscious of the leader you are, and more deliberate about the leader Progress with Unity is asking you to be.



It is organised in three parts.

The first asks what mission leadership requires.

The second translates that requirement into precise personal commitments, organised around the four behaviours and six ways of working that are the foundation of Progress with Unity.

The third invites each leader to examine their own habitual style honestly - to understand what it contributes, where it serves the mission, and where it may be quietly working against it.

Used well, it will support all leaders and managers to lead with greater clarity, greater consistency and greater impact.

Used together, it will help build a shared discipline that Progress with Unity needs and that the people of Wigan Borough deserve.

What mission leadership is

Everything in this guide flows from two shared missions, the commitments that define what Wigan Council exists to achieve:

Creating fair opportunities

for all: Breaking down barriers to reduce financial, health, education, and environmental inequalities for children, families, residents, and businesses.

Making all towns and neighbourhoods flourish:

Partnering with communities to celebrate local identity and ensure every area can thrive.



Mission leadership means orienting everything we do as leaders, how we think, relate, decide and act, around these two missions, rather than around organisational structures, service silos or hierarchical position.

In practice this means five things.

- Relational before it is managerial: building networks across boundaries, creating conditions for others to lead, and modelling the behaviours the whole system is being asked to embody.
- Transformational rather than transactional: helping people connect their everyday work to shared purpose, whilst fostering the psychological safety that makes honest contribution and learning possible.
- Enabling rather than directing: knowing when to step in with authority and when to step back to create space for communities, partners and frontline practitioners to lead.
- Systemic rather than siloed: understanding that the missions can only be delivered through cross-boundary collaboration, and that the way leaders work together is itself a demonstration of the culture they are trying to build.

- Led through networks, not hierarchy: working through purpose, influence and shared ownership rather than positional authority, and modelling networked ways of working as the default rather than the exception.

A note before you begin

This is a practical guide, written to be useful in the ordinary course of your week.

It sits alongside the four behaviours and six ways of working of Progress with Unity, translating them into something you can hold personally: a way of bringing sharper judgement to the leadership moments that matter most.

Read it once to get the shape of it. Then return to the parts that are most alive for you: before a difficult conversation, after a decision that did not land well, in the quiet moment when you are honest enough to ask whether the way you led today actually matched what you believe.



Used this way, it becomes part of how you work.

It can also be used together. The reflective questions at the end of each commitment are designed for honest personal inquiry, but they work equally well as the starting point for a conversation with a colleague or peer.

Used collectively, this guide becomes something more than a personal resource; a shared discipline, and a way of helping each other see what we might not see alone.

Part Two: How We Practise Mission Leadership

The seven commitments in this section build directly on the four behaviours and six ways of working at the heart of Progress with Unity, taking the same commitments and translating them into a precise personal guide: not what the organisation is collectively committed to, but what that commitment asks of you, specifically, as a leader, in the moments that matter most.

They are offered here in draft to be tested, challenged and refined in the Leadership Development sessions ahead.



The Mission Leader: A Personal Protocol

The four behaviours and six ways of working at the heart of Progress with Unity provide a powerful and carefully developed account of how Wigan Council as a whole wants to operate. They describe the culture, the relationships and the organisational practices that make Progress with Unity possible.

This protocol builds directly on that foundation. It takes behaviours and ways of working and translates them into a precise personal guide, something each leader can carry with them, reflect on honestly, and use to appraise and develop their own practice.

Where the four behaviours and six ways of working describe what we are collectively committed to as an organisation, this protocol asks: what does that commitment



require of me, specifically, as a leader, in how I think, how I act, and how I respond in the moments that matter most?

It is organised around seven commitments, each expressed at three levels:

- **Mindset:** the habitual orientation that shapes how you see your role and the situations you face.
- **Technique:** the specific practices and approaches you develop and deploy.
- **In the moment:** the judgement you exercise when it counts.

Together they are designed to support honest self-reflection, deliberate development and real behavioural change; in the meetings, decisions and relationships that make up the working day.

Each commitment also carries a single reflective question. These questions are not a test. They are an invitation to pause, to be honest, and to notice where your next edge of growth as a mission-led leader might lie.

The seven commitments at a glance



1

Always begin with the missions in mind.

Every decision, conversation and piece of work is oriented around a clear, shared picture of what success looks like for the people and communities we serve, one we have genuinely shaped together, and one we are prepared to hold.

2

See the whole before you act.

Before moving to action, you understand the wider system, who is affected, what is missing, and how this decision connects to the missions beyond its immediate boundary.

3

Work from what is actually true, not what is assumed.

You cannot make good decisions about people and places you do not actually know. Proximity is not a management technique, it is a precondition.

4

Make it safe before you make it happen

Psychological safety is a performance condition. You create the conditions in which people contribute honestly, challenge respectfully and bring their full intelligence to shared problems.

5

Hear people out before you make your mind up.

Listening is an active discipline in which you resist premature certainty and stay in genuine inquiry long enough to be genuinely changed by what you hear.

6

Choose courage over comfort.

Mission leadership regularly requires acting against the grain of what is easiest, naming difficult truths, holding the line, and resisting the accumulated weight of small acts of avoidance.

7

Be what you are asking others to become.

Your behaviour is the most powerful leadership instrument available to you, the gap between what you say and what you do is where trust is lost and culture is actually set.

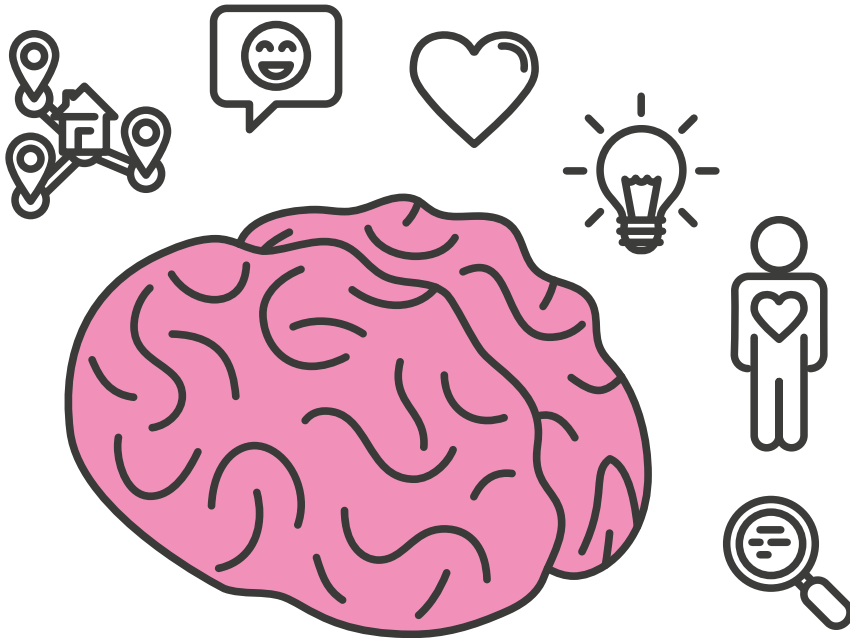
These seven commitments do not replace the four behaviours and six ways of working.

Rather, they give each leader a precise personal reference point, a way of asking, at any moment: am I leading in a mission-led way right now?

The reference framework that accompanies this guide provides the substance.

Commitment One: Always begin with the missions in mind

Every decision, conversation and piece of work is oriented around a clear, shared picture of what success looks like for the people and communities we serve, one we have genuinely shaped together, and one we are prepared to hold.



Mindset

You believe that clarity of purpose is the leader's first responsibility, and that in mission-led work this clarity is never yours alone to declare.

The two missions of Progress with Unity set the direction; what success looks like in any particular piece of work has to be built with the people who will deliver it, live with it, or be affected by it. You hold both sides of this together.

You understand that a future co-created with others carries an ownership that an imposed one never will, and that a leadership team unable to commit collectively to a clear picture of the future leaves everyone beneath it working to different ends.

Mission leadership requires both inclusion and direction, knowing when to build a shared picture of success with others, and when to name it clearly and act with authority.

Both serve the missions. The judgement of which the moment requires is itself a leadership skill.



Technique

- Open every significant meeting or conversation by naming the mission outcome at stake; not the agenda item, but what the agenda item is in service of.
- When shaping a significant piece of work, bring the people who will deliver it, and those most affected by it, into the definition of success from the outset, not after the shape of the answer is fixed.
- Ask explicitly: what does success look like for the person or community most affected by this, and whose view of that do we still need to hear?
- Once a shared picture has been built, name it clearly, commit to it collectively, and hold it; resisting the slow slide back toward activity, process or structural convenience.
- When work begins to go off track, name the concern and redirect: what outcome are we working toward, and are we still headed there?
- Use the two missions of Progress with Unity as a live reference point, not a slogan: does this take us closer or further away?



In the moment

The test of this commitment is the pressure moment, when urgency, complexity or competing demands make it tempting either to act first and ask the purpose question later, or to default to the quickest route through the room by naming the answer yourself.

The leader who has internalised this commitment has learned to resist both.

They have developed the judgement to know when a future needs to be built with others and when it needs to be named clearly and held, and the discipline to do whichever the moment requires without collapsing into the other.

They have also learned that the quality of the question itself, how it is framed, who is invited to answer it, and how long they are willing to stay with it, shapes the quality of everything that follows.

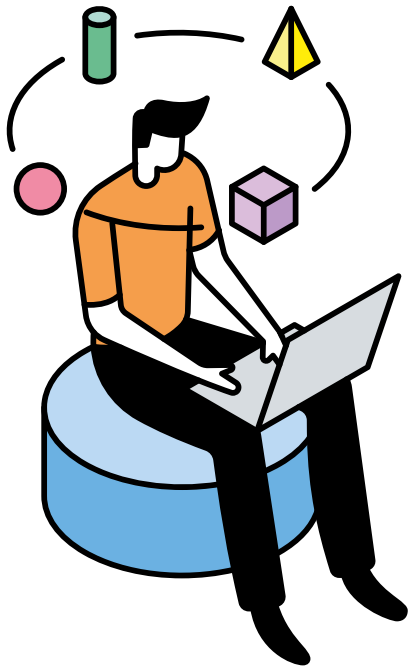


Reflection: When did you last shape a significant piece of work by genuinely building the picture of success with others, and then hold that picture clearly when you sensed the work had gone off-track?

Note:

Commitment Two: See the whole before you act

Before moving to action, you understand the wider system; who is affected, what is missing, and how this decision connects to the missions beyond its immediate boundary.



Mindset

You believe that every decision made within a system creates ripple effects beyond its immediate boundary.

You resist the pull toward siloed thinking, not because you lack focus, but because you understand that short-term efficiency in one part of the system consistently creates longer-term cost elsewhere.

You hold a whole-system view as a leadership responsibility, not an optional extra.

Technique

- Before moving to implementation, map the interdependencies: who else is affected by this decision, and how?
- Ask explicitly whose voice and whose expertise is missing from the conversation and bring them in before the shape of the response is fixed.
- Surface tensions between operational delivery, regulatory requirements and strategic ambition rather than smoothing them over.
- Use cross-boundary conversations as a discipline, not a courtesy; build them into how work is designed, not added at the end.
- Model networked working visibly: make it clear to colleagues that influence, collaboration and shared ownership are how mission delivery actually happens.
- Work confidently in the political environment; understand the roles of elected members, provide impartial advice, and support democratic decision-making as an integral part of how the system functions.
- When a decision feels straightforward, treat that as a prompt to look harder: what are we not seeing?

In the moment

Seeing the whole is not the same as waiting for perfect information. Knowing when enough of the system is in view to act with confidence - and when apparent clarity is actually a sign that important perspectives are absent - is itself a skill.

The most consequential blind spots are usually the ones that feel most obvious in retrospect.

Reflection: Think of a recent decision you were involved in: whose voice or perspective was missing, and what difference might it have made if it had been present from the start?

Note:

Commitment Three: Work from what is actually true, not what is assumed

You cannot make good decisions about people and places you do not actually know. Proximity is not a management technique, it is a precondition.



Mindset

You believe that good decisions are grounded in reality, in the specific context, history and lived experience of the people and places affected by them.

You resist the pull toward abstraction: toward solutions that look coherent on paper but land badly in practice because they were shaped without sufficient contact with what is true for people.

You understand that local knowledge and lived experience are not a supplement to good decision-making; they are a precondition of it.

Technique

- Before forming a judgement or proposing a solution, ask: what do I know about the specific context here; the person, the place, the history?
- Create deliberate opportunities for lived experience to inform design from the outset, not through retrospective consultation but through genuine co-design.
- When making decisions that affect a particular neighbourhood, community or individual, ask: have we heard directly from those most affected, and has what we heard actually changed what we are proposing?
- Ask yourself: what if this were me, my family, my community at the other end of this? Use that question as a check on the gap between what looks coherent in the abstract and what is true for people.
- Base decisions on a combination of evidence: data, stories, insight, lived experience and neighbourhood intelligence.
- Notice when decisions are being made at a level of abstraction that has lost contact with the human reality they are intended to address, and name it.

In the moment

The gap between a good decision and a poor one is often not a gap in analytical capability. It is a gap in understanding of the specific person, the particular place or the history.

Developing the habit of staying close to the ground is not about being everywhere. It is about knowing when you are working from assumption rather than understanding, and having the discipline to stop and find out.

Reflection: How close are you, right now, to the lived experience of the residents and communities most affected by the decisions you are making, and what would it take to get closer?

Note:

Commitment Four: Make it safe before you make it happen

Psychological safety is a performance condition. You create the conditions in which people contribute honestly, challenge respectfully and bring their full intelligence to shared problems.



Mindset

You believe that the quality of what a team produces is inseparable from the quality of the conditions in which they work together.

Psychological safety is not a comfort; it is a performance condition. When people do not feel safe to contribute honestly, challenge respectfully or ask for help openly, the intelligence available to the mission is reduced, and the risks that matter go unspoken.

You understand that creating safety is a leadership act, not a cultural accident.

Technique

- Share context early, explain not just what has been decided but why, and what is still uncertain.
- State explicitly at the outset of significant conversations that disagreement is welcome and that challenge of ideas is not judgement of people.
- Notice who is not speaking and actively invite their voice.
- Respond visibly to feedback and challenge, so that people know their contribution has been heard and considered even when the decision goes a different way.
- Model vulnerability deliberately; acknowledge what you do not know, ask for help when you need it, and share learning from your own mistakes.
- When things go wrong, own collective responsibility before seeking individual explanation.

In the moment

Psychological safety is not built in away-days or declared in team charters. It is built, and destroyed, in the daily texture of how a leader responds when challenged, how they behave under pressure, whether their actions match their stated values.

Safety without challenge produces comfort, not performance. The goal is not to remove difficulty but to create the conditions in which difficulty can be named and worked through together.

Reflection: When did someone last say something in your presence that was genuinely uncomfortable for the room, and how did you respond?

Note:

Commitment Five: Hear people out before you make your mind up

Listening is an active discipline; you resist the pull to decide too early and stay in the conversation long enough to be genuinely changed by what you hear.



Mindset

You believe that listening is an active discipline, not a passive courtesy.

You resist the pull toward premature certainty, toward arriving at conversations with positions already formed, and using the exchange to confirm rather than genuinely test them.

You understand that the leader who listens well makes better decisions, builds deeper ownership, and creates the conditions in which others bring their full intelligence to shared problems.

Technique

- Ask open questions before offering positions: What is your reading of this? What am I missing? What would you do differently?
- Paraphrase what you have heard before responding, to test whether you have fully understood.
- Notice the moment when you shift from listening to advocating and make that shift a conscious choice rather than an unconscious one.
- When you feel certain, treat that as a prompt to inquire further rather than to conclude.
- After significant conversations, ask yourself: Did I hear anything that changed what I think? If the answer is consistently no, examine why.

In the moment

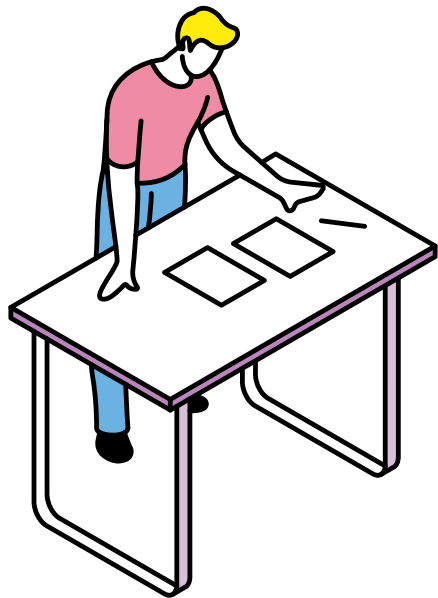
The most important things in a conversation are often not said first. What emerges depends on how long and how well you can stay in genuine inquiry before moving to conclusion. There is a difference between listening oriented toward understanding and listening oriented toward response. Most leaders know this. Fewer have developed the discipline to stay in the former long enough for it to make a significant impact.

Reflection: In your last significant conversation, did you hear anything that genuinely changed what you thought going in?

Note:

Commitment Six: Choose courage over comfort

Mission leadership regularly requires acting against the grain of what is easiest; naming difficult truths, holding the line, and resisting the accumulated weight of small acts of avoidance.



Mindset

You believe that mission leadership regularly requires you to act against the grain of what is easiest, safest or most familiar.

Comfort in this context takes many forms: deferring to hierarchy, retreating behind process, avoiding difficult conversations, smoothing over tensions that need to be named.

You understand that each of these choices, however understandable, is a choice against the mission, and that the accumulation of small acts of avoidance is what makes organisations timid.

Technique

- When facing a difficult decision, ask: Am I about to defer or avoid because this is genuinely not my call, or because it is uncomfortable and I am looking for cover?
- Apply governance and risk frameworks with mature judgement. Ask whether a rule in this situation serves the mission or obstructs it and engage with that question honestly.
- Name tensions and difficult truths directly rather than allowing ambiguity to persist, say the thing the room is thinking but not saying.
- Clarify explicitly the boundaries within which colleagues can exercise discretion, so that empowerment is real rather than notional.
- When you have made a courageous decision, explain your reasoning so that colleagues understand not just what you decided, but how you thought about it.

In the moment

There is a difference between courage and recklessness, between the disciplined use of authority in service of the mission and the undisciplined disregard of legitimate constraint.

The other thing worth naming is that courage is cumulative. Each act of courageous judgement makes the next one marginally easier. Each act of avoidance makes the next one marginally harder. Over time, those margins compound. A leader's willingness to choose discomfort in service of the mission is one of the most powerful signals available to the people around them.

Reflection: Where are you currently choosing comfort over the harder conversation or decision the mission requires, and what is the cost of that choice?

Note:

Commitment Seven: Be what you are asking others to become

Your behaviour is the most powerful leadership instrument available to you. The gap between what you say and what you do is where trust is lost and culture is actually set.

Mindset

You believe that your behaviour is the most powerful leadership instrument available to you, more powerful than any strategy, framework or communication.

The gap between what leaders say and what leaders do is where trust is lost and culture is set.

You understand that asking others to embody the behaviours and ways of working of Progress with Unity while not consistently embodying them yourself is potentially undermining.



Technique

- Before significant leadership moments, a meeting, a difficult conversation or an important decision, ask: Am I about to model the behaviour I am asking of others?
- After significant leadership moments, ask: Did I lead in the way Progress with Unity asks of me? Where did I fall short, and why?
- Use coaching as a core leadership practice, not just as a development tool but as the everyday way you help colleagues think for themselves, grow their confidence and contribute to the missions.
- Invite feedback on your own leadership behaviour from colleagues including those you lead.
- When you fall short of the standard, own it directly, explain what happened, and name what you will do differently.
- Make your own development as a mission-led leader visible to those you lead: share what you are working on, what you are finding difficult, and what you are learning.

In the moment

Consistency under pressure is the truest test of this commitment. Anyone can model the right behaviours when things are going well. The moments of difficulty, scrutiny and uncertainty are where the culture is actually set, by what you do, not what you say. The standard here is not perfection.

It is honesty: a leader who falls short and owns it with integrity builds greater trust than one who maintains a performance of consistency that the people around them can see straight through.

Reflection: Where is there currently a gap between the leadership behaviour you are asking of others and what you are consistently modelling yourself?

Note:

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