



HM Inspectorate
of Probation

Contemporary leadership evidence for probation and youth justice services

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Foreword

HM Inspectorate of Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth justice services. *Academic Insights* are aimed at all those with an interest in the evidence base. We commission leading academics to present their views on specific topics, assisting with informed debate and aiding understanding of what helps and what hinders probation and youth justice services.

This report was kindly produced by Dr Sean Brophy, highlighting why leadership quality matters both instrumentally and ethically for UK public services, including probation and youth justice services. Having summarised the key developments in the academic research, it is shown how the evidence base for investing in leadership has never been stronger – supporting staff engagement, satisfaction, performance, and retention – and how it promotes a focus upon the transformational leadership behaviours of building trust and acting with integrity, encouraging others, encouraging innovative thinking, and coaching and developing people. Crucially, improvements in the capabilities of first-line managers can return substantial benefits; senior leaders should thus treat leadership development as a first-order investment with middle managers resourced and expected to conduct genuine developmental supervision. One of the most accessible ways to put transformational leadership into practice is through the regular one-to-one supervision conversations between a line manager and a frontline practitioner, and the paper closes with a practical template to structure these conversations, combining a coaching framework with the behaviours set out within the Full Range Leadership Model, the most extensively applied and validated model of transformational leadership. This model is helpfully operationalised in the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire, which any organisation can use to benchmark its own leadership practices.



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The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the policy position of HM Inspectorate of Probation

1. Introduction

Leadership matters, for two connected reasons:

- 1) **instrumentally** – organisations with more effective leaders perform better, recruit and retain stronger staff, and adapt more readily to change
- 2) **ethically** – most people spend most of their waking lives at work, and leaders carry real responsibility for what that experience is like.

The United Kingdom, however, has a long-standing problem with the quality of its workplace management practices. Two decades of evidence from the World Management Survey, established by John Van Reenen, Nicholas Bloom and Raffaella Sadun, place British firms solidly mid-table on management practice – below the United States, Germany, Sweden, Japan and Canada, and clustered instead with France, Italy, and Poland (Scur et al., 2021; Bloom et al., 2019). Between a quarter and a third of cross-country variation in productivity can be traced to the quality of management (Scur et al., 2021), and the Chartered Management Institute has estimated that closing even part of the gap with Germany over a generation could be worth tens of billions of pounds to UK GDP (CMI, 2024). If the UK has a productivity puzzle, management and leadership quality is not a peripheral piece of it; it is central.

This matters for probation and youth justice services. Both are funded from the public purse and their key outcomes depend less on capital or technology and more on the quality of the interactions between staff and the people they supervise. Leadership – how managers and senior leaders orient, motivate, support and develop their teams – shapes everything about those interactions: from whether practitioners stay in post long enough to build expertise, to whether they feel safe to reflect openly on mistakes, and to whether they experience their work as meaningful rather than as a checklist to be completed.

The two services are, however, differently configured. The Probation Service, since unification in 2021, is a large, nationally managed arm of HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) and, through that, of the civil service. It operates through twelve regions with standardised roles, national pay bands, and a strong performance-management apparatus. Recent thematic evidence describes a service under substantial pressure, with high caseloads, significant administrative burden, and a culture that many practitioners experience as task- rather than people-centred (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2025). Youth justice services, by contrast, are around 150 much smaller local teams, typically hosted by local authorities, funded primarily through a national grant administered by the Ministry of Justice, with national priorities set centrally but considerable operational discretion retained by local leaders. They are generally better resourced per case, more multi-agency in character, and more autonomous in how they organise themselves.

Nevertheless, the evidence base on leadership applies to both. This paper distils eighty years of academic leadership research into an accessible summary for the sector. It focuses on the most heavily evidenced leadership approach (transformational leadership) and on how that approach looks in practice at the frontline. It closes with a practical template that frontline managers and supervisors can adapt to structure one-to-one supervisory meetings with their teams. The aim is to provide practitioners and leaders with a set of evidence-based actions that they can implement immediately to make a measurable difference to performance, satisfaction, and retention.

2. From evidence to practice

2.1 Setting the scene: why leadership quality matters for UK public services

The World Management Survey (WMS) is the most systematic attempt yet to measure management practices at scale. Since 2002, it has built a dataset of over 13,000 firms and 4,000 schools and hospitals across more than 35 countries, scoring organisations on practices such as performance monitoring, target-setting, people management, and continuous improvement (Scur et al., 2021). Three clusters emerge consistently among countries:

- a top group comprising the United States, Germany, Sweden and Japan scores well above the rest
- a second group, which includes the UK alongside France, Italy, Poland and Portugal, performs noticeably less well
- a third group, including Brazil, China, India and Greece, sits further behind (Scur et al., 2021).

Britain's middling overall score is not driven by a lack of world-class managers at the very top end but by a long tail of poorly managed organisations, particularly in sectors with limited management training (Bloom et al., 2019). The picture is particularly acute in public services. Across countries, public sector organisations score below average on management practice irrespective of location or sector, driven specifically by weaker incentive systems (rewarding and promoting high-performing staff), inadequate training systems for low performers, and promotion frameworks based on tenure rather than performance (CMI, 2024).

In the UK specifically, public sector productivity grew by only around four per cent between 1997 and 2018, compared to 27 per cent across the economy as a whole (CMI, 2024). Research by the Social Market Foundation, cited in the same CMI analysis, finds that the relationship between management and leadership quality and public service effectiveness is consistent across education, healthcare, and public administration: with an average of around 30 per cent of schools and colleges receiving 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement' ratings for leadership and management from Ofsted across 2017 to 2023.

Recent years have seen regional responses emerge. The Greater Manchester Good Employment Charter, launched in 2019, brings public and private employers together around seven characteristics of good employment including people management, and its Phase 2 evaluation of 67 participating organisations found early positive effects on employment practice across all seven characteristics (Crozier, 2022). Similar initiatives are developing elsewhere, such as in the West of England, reflecting a growing recognition that management quality is a legitimate policy lever at regional as well as national level.

Why should this concern probation and youth justice leaders? There are three reasons:

- 1) management quality is not confined to private firms: the WMS has extended its methods to public services, and the patterns it finds tend to be similar
- 2) HMPPS and, through it, the Probation Service sit squarely within the civil service, an employer that draws on the same national labour market for managerial talent and which is shaped by the same national norms of supervision, feedback, and performance management
- 3) perhaps most importantly, the thematic and inspection evidence within the sector itself echoes the WMS findings. The 2025 thematic inspection of probation recruitment,

training and retention, for example, described a workforce where line-management support is uneven, where opportunities for coaching and development are frequently displaced by immediate operational pressure, and where staff leaving the service cite leadership and line management among their main reasons for going (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2025).

2.2 Eighty years of leadership evidence in brief

Academic leadership research spans roughly eighty years, and can be organised into the broad families of evidence set out in Table 1 (Northouse, 2021).

Table 1: Broad families of evidence

Family of evidence	Summary
Trait theories	These theories tested the intuitive idea that effective leaders are born with distinct personality characteristics. The evidence is modest: across meta-analyses, extraversion and, to a lesser extent, conscientiousness and openness to experience are positively associated with leadership emergence and effectiveness, but effect sizes are small and there is no stable 'leader personality' (McCrae and Costa, 1987; DeRue et al., 2011).
Behavioural theories	These theories asked what leaders actually do. Two consistent dimensions emerged: task-oriented behaviour (clarifying roles, setting goals, monitoring work) and relationship-oriented behaviour (supporting, consulting, recognising contribution). Effective leaders do both (Yukl, Gordon and Taber, 2002; Judge, Piccolo and Ilies, 2004). Katz (1955) added that technical skills matter most at junior levels, human skills matter at every level, and conceptual skills become increasingly important as leaders progress in their career.
Situational leadership (Hersey and Blanchard, 1971)	It is argued that the right balance between directive and supportive behaviour depends on the individual follower's developmental level on a particular task: newer staff typically need more direction, while more experienced staff benefit from greater autonomy combined with continuing support. The implication is a deliberately individualised approach to team members rather than a single default style.
Transformational leadership (Avolio and Bass, 1999)	Identified a cluster of behaviours (building trust, acting with integrity, encouraging others, stimulating innovative thinking, and coaching people) that go beyond transactional exchange to shift follower motivation and commitment. This is where some of the strongest evidence lies, as discussed in section 2.3.
The Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) study	This study of 62 societies (House et al., 2004) identified a set of universally endorsed positive attributes of effective leaders (being dynamic, encouraging, motivational, trustworthy), a set of universally endorsed negatives (being egocentric, dictatorial, asocial), and a smaller set of attributes whose value varies by culture.

Family of evidence	Summary
Inclusive leadership (Randel et al., 2018)	Emphasises that effective leaders hold pro-diversity beliefs and make followers feel both that they belong and that they are valued for who they individually are; a two-sided requirement that is particularly salient for services whose staff and service users are diverse on many dimensions.
Toxic and destructive leadership	Padilla, Hogan and Kaiser (2007) describe a 'toxic triangle' in which destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments combine to produce organisational harm. The less dramatic, more common patterns of passive leadership – waiting for problems to emerge before acting (management-by-exception passive), or avoiding engagement altogether (laissez-faire) – are unambiguously harmful to performance, satisfaction, and retention (Avolio and Bass, 1999; DeRue et al., 2011).

2.3 The Full Range Leadership Model: what works

The most extensively applied and validated model of transformational leadership is Avolio and Bass's (1999) Full Range Leadership Model, operationalised in the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ), an instrument that has itself been the subject of hundreds of validation studies and is used in research internationally (Judge and Piccolo, 2004). The model identifies four behaviours, known in the literature as the 'Four I's' and summarised in Figure 1, that distinguish transformational leaders.

Figure 1: Transformational leadership behaviours



These behaviours, applied consistently, produce what the Full Range Model calls 'performance beyond expectations': discretionary effort, commitment, and creativity, on top of the expected performance that more transactional behaviours (rewarding achievement, monitoring for deviations) produce. Passive and avoidant leadership styles, where the leader either waits for problems to escalate before acting or steps away from the responsibilities of the role altogether, are consistently associated with worse performance and lower satisfaction (DeRue et al., 2011).

The evidence for the model is robust and strengthening. Wang et al.'s (2011) meta-analysis of 25 years of research across 117 independent samples found transformational leadership positively related both to individual-level performance and to higher-level outcomes. More recently, Backhaus and Vogel (2022) conducted a meta-analysis specifically focused on the public sector, finding that transformational leadership is positively related to performance, job satisfaction, and organisational commitment, and negatively related to turnover intention. Bao, Zhang and Yang's (2025) meta-analysis, drawing on 70 primary studies and over 718,000 participants, reaches similar conclusions.

Perhaps most importantly for services considering how to invest in leadership development, there is now experimental evidence that leadership can be taught. Jacobsen et al.'s (2022) randomised field experiment across 463 public and private organisations, including schools, daycare centres, tax offices, and bank branches, assigned leaders randomly to transformational training, transactional training, a combined programme, or a control group. A year on, employee ratings of leader behaviour had moved in the expected direction, and for school principals there were measurable downstream effects on pupil attainment. Well-designed leadership development is a defensible use of public resources.

2.4 Applying the evidence in probation and youth justice

The general applicability of the evidence does not mean that context is irrelevant. Probation and youth justice services are distinct working environments, and the practical priorities for leadership differ accordingly.

The Probation Service, since its 2021 unification, is a large, nationally managed arm of HMPPS. It operates through twelve regions, each led by a Regional Probation Director, and supervises a substantial proportion of the adults in contact with the criminal justice system. The recent thematic inspection describes a service under significant strain: high caseloads, substantial administrative burden, turnover that in parts of the country exceeds replacement, and practitioners who describe their working environments in terms ranging from 'stressful' to 'bordering on toxic' (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2025). Supervision by senior probation officers (SPOs), the first-line management relationship that matters most for practitioners' day-to-day experience, is variable (Ball, Moore and Buckley, 2024). Some practitioners describe excellent, individualised coaching, but many report supervision focused primarily on compliance and case allocation, what the Full Range Leadership Model would describe as transactional supervision. The thematic evidence also suggests that under sustained caseload pressure this pattern can drift further: staff describe managers who are less visible, who intervene only when problems have become acute, and whose engagement is confined to immediate operational direction. That kind of reactive, firefighting supervision is consistently associated with worse outcomes for performance and retention.

The practical implication for the Probation Service is not that transactional, operational management should be abandoned. It is necessary to run any complex public service. It is that transactional management alone is insufficient, and that leaders at every level need to build in

the transformational behaviours that the evidence shows drive engagement, innovation, and the performance beyond expectations that public services depend on in periods of strain.

Youth justice services operate at a different scale. There are around 150 local services in England and Wales, typically hosted by a local authority, employing multidisciplinary teams of social workers, youth workers, police officers, health workers and others. The Ministry of Justice now sets national priorities and administers the core youth justice grant, but devolves considerable operational autonomy to local services, and the sector has historically been better resourced per case than adult probation. The leadership task here is different in emphasis: maintaining shared vision across an ecosystem of partner organisations, translating national priorities into locally coherent practice, and sustaining the multi-agency culture that evidence associates with better outcomes for children in the justice system.

For both services, the evidence points in the same direction. Leadership at the frontline, the SPO supervising a probation practitioner or the team manager in a youth justice service, is where most of the relational work of leadership gets done, and it is where most of the uplift from transformational behaviours will be found.

UK-specific evidence on how to develop line managers is also emerging. The ESRC-funded Good Employment Learning Lab has evaluated short online interventions, including masterclasses, peer learning sets, and skills coaching, with 366 line managers in the adult social care sector, and has published a framework for designing realistic and practical people management training (Rouse et al., 2023). The interventions are short, place-based, and target the people management problems that line managers actually face, a design logic that translates readily to frontline management in probation and youth justice settings.

2.5 A practical template: the transformational supervision conversation

One of the most accessible places to put transformational leadership into practice is the regular one-to-one supervision conversations between a line manager and a frontline practitioner. A systematic approach to these conversations – sometimes called coaching supervision – has been adopted in organisations as varied as Google, the British Army, and a range of UK professional services, and the common principles are consistent with the Full Range Model evidence.

Google's internal research, published through its re:Work materials, identifies coaching as the single most important behaviour of its effective managers, and structures its coaching guidance around the GROW model (Goal, Reality, Options, Will) originally developed by Whitmore (1992) in the UK and now widely used in management development (Google re:Work, 2026). Google's coaching guide also identifies a set of supporting practices (full presence in one-to-ones, active listening, open-ended questions, specific and timely feedback, and balanced motivational and constructive feedback) that together distinguish its most effective managers. Google makes these materials freely available through its [rework platform](#), which publishes a range of evidence-based people-management tools.

The British Army's Leadership Code (British Army, 2021) distils seven behaviours that the Army expects of all its leaders: lead by example; encourage thinking; apply reward and discipline; demand high performance; encourage confidence in the team; recognise individual strengths and weaknesses; and strive for team goals. Four of these map directly onto the Four I's of transformational leadership — lead by example (idealised influence), encourage thinking (intellectual stimulation), recognise individual strengths and weaknesses (individualised

consideration), and encourage confidence in the team and strive for team goals (inspirational motivation) — with the remainder sitting cleanly in the transactional cluster.

The Code is explicit that these behaviours are to be applied through coaching rather than command, and the British Army teaches the GROW model as its coaching framework, the same model Google uses (British Army, 2021). That two organisations as different as a global technology firm and a national armed force have both converged on transformational leadership and the GROW coaching model is striking, and the underlying approach may offer a coherent and explicit framework for practices that are already present (e.g. reflective practice supervision within probation), but unevenly applied, within probation and youth justice services. Combining these with the Full Range Model's five transformational behaviours produces a practical six-step template that any probation or youth justice team manager can adapt for use in a 30–60 minute supervision conversation. The template is summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Structure of a transformational supervision conversation

Step	What the leader does	Why it matters
1. Open with presence	Put devices away. <i>Start with the person, not the case list.</i> Check in on how they are, not just what they have done.	Signals the person matters; builds trust. Consistent with Google's 'be fully present' and the British Army's 'lead by example'.
2. Acknowledge specific progress	Call out one or two recent pieces of positive work or behaviours in concrete, specific terms. Avoid generic praise.	Rewards achievement in concrete terms. Consistent with Google's 'specific and timely feedback' and the British Army's 'recognise individual strengths'.
3. Explore current work with curiosity	Ask open questions: 'what went well this week?', 'what did you try that didn't work?'. Listen more than you speak. Resist the urge to solve problems.	Encourages innovative thinking (<i>intellectual stimulation</i>). Consistent with Google's 'active listening and open-ended questions' and the British Army's 'encourage thinking'.
4. Offer individualised development	Ask what specific help would be useful: a piece of training, a shadow opportunity, a conversation with a colleague, space to try something new. <i>Agree at least one concrete action.</i>	Coaches and develops people (<i>individualised consideration</i>). Consistent with situational leadership and the Army's 'recognise individual strengths and weaknesses'.
5. Link to purpose and values	Briefly tie the work back to the service's mission and to the person's own reasons for doing the job. For example: ask 'what reminded you this week why you came into this work?', or link a specific case outcome to what the service exists to achieve ('what you described is rehabilitation working').	Provides meaning and challenge (<i>inspirational motivation</i>). Consistent with Google's 'balance motivational and constructive feedback' and the Army's 'encourage confidence in the team'.
6. Agree commitments and next check-in	Summarise the two or three things each of you has agreed to do before the next meeting. Schedule it now.	Closes the loop and models follow-through. Consistent with the British Army's 'strive for team goals'.

Used consistently across a team, this structure moves supervision away from the purely transactional 'what have you done, what are you going to do' pattern that stressed first-line managers frequently default to, and towards the coaching orientation that the evidence associates with higher engagement and retention. It does not require new resources; it requires protected time, which is itself a leadership choice by those setting expectations above the SPO or team manager.

Two practical cautions are warranted. First, the template is not a script: mechanical application will quickly feel performative. It is intended as a reminder of the ground to cover, not a checklist to work through. Second, it depends on the structural conditions – caseloads, diary protection, and the tone set by senior leaders – that make a 30-minute developmental conversation possible in the first place. Where first-line managers are overwhelmed, supervision will default to triage, however good the template.

3. Conclusion

Three conclusions follow from the evidence reviewed in this paper.

1. Workplace leadership quality matters more than the UK's comparative record might suggest the country has yet acknowledged. World Management Survey evidence locates Britain in the second tier of developed economies on management practice, and attributes a substantial share of our productivity gap to this (Scur et al., 2021; Bloom et al., 2019). Probation and youth justice services draw on the same national labour market and are shaped by the same national norms; the challenges on supervisory quality identified in the 2025 thematic inspection are not surprising in that wider context (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2025).
2. The evidence on what works is unusually robust. Eighty years of leadership research, most recently summarised in two public-sector meta-analyses (Backhaus and Vogel, 2022; Bao, Zhang and Yang, 2025) and a large-scale randomised field experiment (Jacobsen et al., 2022), converges on the Full Range Leadership Model. Transformational behaviours drive performance beyond expectations. Transactional behaviours produce expected performance, and passive and avoidant behaviours damage performance and retention. And, crucially, leadership can be learned: well-designed training changes leader behaviour and, downstream, organisational outcomes.
3. The application in probation and youth justice is well within reach. The Full Range Model is not abstract: it is operationalised in the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire, which any organisation can use to benchmark its own leadership practices, and it has direct behavioural translations into the daily supervision conversation, as Table 2 illustrates.

Several practical implications follow for leaders at different levels of both services. Senior leaders setting workforce strategy should treat leadership development as a first-order investment rather than a discretionary extra, and should measure it (for example, by incorporating key Full Range Model items into staff surveys) so that leadership quality is visible alongside operational metrics. Middle managers should be resourced and expected to conduct genuine developmental supervision, which requires both training and diary protection. First-line managers, SPOs in probation and team managers in youth justice, are the critical link, and the evidence suggests that even modest investments in their capability (coaching-style supervision training, peer support, protected time) return substantial benefits. Practitioners themselves can use the Full Range Model as a lens through which to understand their own experience of being managed and, in due course, to inform how they lead when they step into management roles.

Finally, leadership is not only an instrumental question about performance. Employees and citizens deserve good leaders. Staff leaving probation often cite leadership and line management among their most common reasons for going, and their experiences affect the service they are able to offer to the people on their caseloads (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2025). The case for investing in the leadership evidence base is therefore both practical and ethical, and the evidence for doing so has never been stronger.

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