Tomasz Kayser

*Tomasz Kayser has been First Deputy Mayor of Poznan since 1990. He is responsible for local economic development, strategic planning, and public safety and order in the city. Kayser is also chair of the Programme Council of the Polish Local Economic Development Association; deputy chair of the Local Tourism Association Board; deputy chair of the Board of Directors of the Poznań International Fair Ltd; and a member of the Greater Poland Monitoring Committee of the National Strategy for Regional Development.*

1. A Long Term Leader

Tomasz Kayser was born in Poznan on 6 March 1959.¹ His career in local government began in 1990 when he was elected as a Councilor and appointed Deputy Mayor of Poznan. He has been Deputy Mayor ever since, (acting as Deputy to two different Mayors) and has been at the heart of the city’s leadership throughout its transition from a centrally planned to a market economy.

Poznan stands out amongst Polish cities as a municipality which has been particularly successful in transforming its economy since the end of the Communist era. Since 1990, Poznan has consistently had the lowest unemployment rate of all Polish cities outside of the capital Warsaw. The number of businesses in the city has increased from 10,000 to over 100,000. GDP is over five times greater than it was in the early 1990s; and foreign direct investment (FDI) is ten times greater.²

The city’s transformation has been guided by a series of development strategies, the first of which was prepared by a team lead by Tomasz Kayser and finalized in 1994.³ After an initial focus on attraction of foreign direct investment and large businesses to the city, more recently Poznan has pursued an economic strategy based on diversification and support for SMEs, in particular looking to develop the city’s importance as a centre of knowledge, culture, tourism and sports. The city’s current strategic plan - the Development Strategy for the City of Poznan 2030, also sees greater functional integration with the city’s neighbouring municipalities as a crucial factor in strengthening Poznan’s position as a competitive metropolitan centre.⁴

Tomasz Kayser has received recognition for his own role in the city’s successful local development, including awards from the Polish Minister of the Interior and Administration for “Outstanding achievement in the Programme for the Development of the City of Poznań”⁵ and an Honorary Distinction for his contribution for the development of the Greater Poland Region.⁶

2. What is a Leader’s Role?

Tomasz Kayser believes that city leaders have a number of clear roles:

   2.1. Managing the process of change
Cities must be dynamic and embrace change if they are to become and remain competitive. Kayser feels that one of the most important roles of the city leader is firstly to create and work towards a vision, but also crucially, to help citizens understand and be reconciled with changes which are needed to achieve that vision.

The need to manage the process of change was hugely important in Poznan and other Polish and Eastern European cities after 1990. Tomasz Kayser compares the situation in Polish cities before 1990 to “living in a room with all the doors closed”. Once the Communist era came to an end “Suddenly the doors opened, and we were faced with... opportunities and threats at the same time.”

The change from a planned to a market economy was abrupt and dramatic, deeply affecting the everyday lives of citizens. Kayser has recalled how difficult it was for many citizens to accept both the market changes and social changes. He explains that in this situation,

“The role of the mayor, the leader was not only to introduce the changes but also to translate the changes into language which the people could understand and could accept. It was a time of not only understanding what we have to do, but also being very sensitive to what people can accept and be active in helping people to accept some actions in a shorter time.”

Kayser believes that communicating with citizens, explaining why changes may be necessary and the reasons for them are a key part of managing change processes, and that the role of change ‘manager’ or ‘interpreter’ is common to city leaders across the world.

2.2. Encouraging collaboration and synergies

Kayser suggests that a second important role of the city leader is the encouragement of networking and collaboration between different actors in the city. City leaders should be responsible for brokering communication between groups who otherwise might not be able, or willing, to communicate.

One aspect of this role is simply creating space for people to meet and communicate. In Poznan, Kayser and other city leaders created such a space by hosting a New Year’s Reception. City Hall were initially concerned about holding the event, fearing a media backlash on misuse of public money, but the inaugural event was hugely successful with over 800 attendees, many of whom stayed until late into the night. Attendees reported that the event provided a vital networking opportunity and a unique chance to meet many old and new contacts in one place.

Another aspect of the city leader’s role as ‘collaboration promoter’, involves acting as a kind of broker or mediator. Tomasz Kayser has found that it is often especially essential for city leaders to take this role in order to facilitate interactions between the business sector and academia, who operate in different ways and ‘speak different languages’. He pays particular attention to fostering this alliance in Poznan, despite the fact that the university sector is the domain of state administration in Poland. One example of successful negotiations facilitated by the city administration, and in which Kayser played a role, were those held between Poznan University and Allegro – a successful local company which acts as an online auction host (akin to Ebay) and which needed well qualified, local workers.

A collaborative multi-party approach has been supported and adopted in several economic spheres in Poznan. One such example is the Local Tourism Association, which Kayser initiated in 2003 to be responsible for tourism promotion in the Poznan metropolitan area. The association acts as a platform...
of cooperation between Poznan and surrounding municipalities and between public administration and business. With over 60 members it is regarded as one of the strongest local tourism organizations in Poland. The city’s Entrepreneurship Days (see section 2.4) are a further example of multi-party collaboration in the city.

2.3. Worrying about gaps

Tomasz Kayser believes that much of a city leader’s activity can be classified as ‘acceleration’. Their actions often speed up processes of change, or bring about situations which would have happened organically in any event. However, he asserts that this should not be the case for everything a city leader does, or for every project they put into action. City leaders should also be looking for ‘gaps’ – what does the city not do that it should do, or not do well enough? Once gaps are identified, leaders should concentrate their efforts on trying to fill the gap and remedy the situation.

In Poznan, Kayser identified a ‘gap’ in the diffusion of innovative ideas between the city’s universities and the business sector. Although innovation was occurring, it was not being ‘translated’ into business opportunities or the creation of SMEs. As a result, he set up the Greater Poland Innovative Platform – an online tool that facilitates contacts between businessmen and researchers. The Platform is supported by special promoters in each of the city’s universities. The promoters are employees of the university, who provide business people with any support they might need in order to tackle the universities’ complex administrative processes.

2.4. Attracting people with the right skills to the city.

In the years immediately following the collapse of Communism, Poznan’s city leaders focused on attracting capital to the city, largely in the form of Foreign Direct Investment. However Kayser explains that more recently, leaders have come to realize and believe that in today’s globalized world, cities are in fact primarily competing for talented people, rather than capital. He therefore believes that one of the city leader’s most important jobs is to attract skilled people to live in their city.

In Poznan, Kayser has concentrated on supporting the Universities in their efforts to attract talent. He explains “Together with the university we can be much more effective in attracting talented people to our city – first to study and then to stay once they graduate”. Amongst the schemes introduced in collaboration with the city’s academic institutions are a scholarship scheme for the best Polish secondary school graduates, and “Poznan Attracts the Best”: a campaign which aims to attract young people with interesting ambitions to Poznan.

Kayser also believes that SMEs are at the heart of a strong city economy, and as such it is of vital importance that cities both attract and ‘grow their own’ entrepreneurs. In order to encourage entrepreneurialism in Poznan, Tomasz Kayser introduced Entrepreneurship Days to the city. The largest event of its kind in Poland, these days focus on changing public perceptions about entrepreneurs and building their reputation amongst citizens to equal those of doctors, lawyers and academics. He explains:

“We are all concerned about health, we are concerned about safety and we are all very much concerned about jobs. So we should respect those citizens who create jobs in the same way as we appreciate and respect doctors who look after our health and professors who educate us.”
Poznan’s Entrepreneurship Days seek to inspire young people to become entrepreneurs and celebrate entrepreneurial activity – for example through the presenting of an Entrepreneurship Leader Award - as well as providing information on existing support networks.

3. Leadership Style

Tomasz Kayser is perceived locally as a good organiser and as a high ranking, but politically neutral, expert official. He is seen as an individual who uses his skills to serve the city, rather than as a careerist politician. In a 2004 study of his leadership style, Swianiewicz et al (2004) found that Kayser’s leadership was most akin to John’s (1997) classification of Mayor as Consensus Facilitator – a leader who favours consultation and coalition building. He maintains good connections with the business community in the city, and often reaches out to external partners in order to utilise their resources and engender support for his projects. Swianiewicz also recognized however that some aspects of Kayser’s leadership style were closer to a ‘Mayor as Visionary’ classification. He suggests that this makes Kayser a good match for the Polish population, who, for a variety of reasons, favour these two styles of governance equally, and far more than any other (for example a caretaker or ‘city boss’ style).

Kayser is an innovative leader. He often develops projects which are beyond the remit and routine activities of the city government. One example of such a project that he has instilled in Poznan is a competition for the best MA or PhD thesis which can be of practical use to the city. The competition, a part of a specially designed strategic program “Academic Poznan”, seeks to harness the ideas and creativity of the Poznan’s large student population for the city’s benefit, whilst also identifying talented individuals who are interested in issues which are important to city development. Kayser has also been directly responsible for implementing new functions in the city administration, such as city marketing, as well as introducing new procedures such as project management principles.

Kayser is alert to novel management solutions practiced elsewhere in the world, and many of the innovations which he has introduced in Poznan have been inspired by similar foreign schemes. For example, the revitalization of Półwiejska Street, a central shopping street which had fallen into decline, was based on a project that Kayser had seen in Nottingham, UK. A collaboration with Poznan University which monitored quality of life and living conditions in Poznan was established as a result of observations he made in several US cities including Washington, and the city’s Entrepreneurship Days were inspired by those run by Barcelona Activa. The Local Economic Development Association, which Kayser co-founded, primarily sought to introduce good local economic development and strategic planning practices to Poland based on international experience.

Kayser certainly has an extremely international outlook compared to many other local government leaders. He maintains a strong network of contacts abroad and is a frequent speaker at international conferences. During his time as Deputy Mayor, Kayser has played an active role on a number of international bodies. For example: from 2001-2003 he worked with the OECD Task Force on the implementation of their Environment Action Programme for Central and Eastern Europe, from 2002-2004 he was a member of the Cities of Change Network Project initiated by the World Bank and the Bertelsmann Foundation, and until 2013, he was Chair of EUROCITIES Economic Development Forum. He has advised cities in Europe and Asia on local management, strategy planning and economic development at the invitation of the OECD, World Bank, European Commission and European Parliament.
4. Advice for Future City Leaders

The remarkable longevity of Kayser’s leadership, means that he has an exceptional wealth of experience from which to draw upon for the benefit of future city leaders. His key advice is:

- **Build Partnerships.**

As city governments necessarily control only a limited number of assets, an ability and willingness to build partnerships is an essential part of the city leader’s job. As Kayser says: “*if you want to make big things happen, you need partners*”. Building partnerships includes fostering collaboration and co-operation between different economic sectors (as discussed in section 2.2) but also building partnerships between the city administration and neighbouring municipalities, or higher tiers of government.

In Poznan, Kayser has worked hard at building relationships in the city’s wider metropolitan area. In particular, the development of a Centre for Metropolitan Research has enabled mayors from the city of Poznan and neighbouring municipalities to better understand the benefits of co-operation. Poznan’s most recent development strategy “Poznan 2030” involved the efforts and collaboration of over 240 partners.xviii

- **Don’t be Afraid of Opposition.**

Kayser emphasizes that introducing important changes is bound to create opposition, as people are not used to change. As such, the leader’s role in communicating becomes even more important. City leaders must communicate, talk to citizens and different partners, explain changes and their rationale in order to ensure that their actions are understood and to maximize support for their actions. Securing public buy-in is of course key for city officials who must stand for re-election every few years.

As Kayser puts it: “*if your actions are met with strong opposition, it means that you are either doing something great that will give a real boost to the city development or something very stupid. If your actions are not questioned you are probably doing something ordinary, maybe useful, but it will not bring about qualitative, significant changes. Remember engineer Eiffel and the protests he had to withstand while building the tower which is today perceived as a symbol of Paris*”.xix

- **Invest in Human Resources.**

For a city leader to be successful, he or she must have many ideas and start many projects. It is impossible for the leader to control any significant number of projects continuously and simultaneously, and therefore it is essential that they identify appropriate people to take over the different projects. Whilst experts can be hired in to help, Kayser believes that important strategies should be firmly rooted within the city administration. In Poznan, forming the right team was particularly difficult following the transition from a market economy, as city officials had no experience of acting autonomously. With support from others, Kayser took two years to specially train city staff on how to prepare the city’s first development plan, how to involve citizens, how to implement participation principles and how to attract resources. The city now also runs internship programmes within City Hall.
• Create a Sense of Ownership

Kayser feels that it is of vital importance to ensure that citizens are involved in developing city projects, and feel a sense of ownership over them. He is inspired by an ancient Chinese proverb which he considers to be especially insightful:

“A good leader is the one where people do what he wants because they are afraid of him;
A better leader is the one where people do what he wants because they love him;
The best leader is the one where people do what he wants, and after doing it they say ‘Look! How clever we invented this idea, and implemented it’.”

In relation to the initiation of Entrepreneurship Days in Poznan, Kayser explains:

“We needed someone who initiated this cooperation [between academia, business and the city] and this was the role of the mayor, to give the idea and then to bring people from different parties to one table and – this is very important – to make them feel that they really co-own this idea – that it was not an idea developed only by the mayor, but that actually it was developed by all of them together.”

By creating a sense of ownership, Kayser believes that projects become much more durable, not least because it increases the number of people with an interest in implementing the project and seeing it continue.
References

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