



Words Matthew Sutcliffe

Green Leader

Tony Dean, the Environment Agency's new regional director in the Northwest, talks to Matthew Sutcliffe.

When Tony Dean says that his style of leadership is “consultative”, he isn't kidding. When he took over as head of the Environment Agency (EA) in the Northwest in December last year his first priority was to meet as many of the 1,200 people who work for him as possible. In a three day marathon of meeting and greeting he managed to introduce himself to almost all the staff at the EA's Warrington based headquarters.

That just left the hundreds of staff spread out around the region in offices and depots from Chester to Penrith. Most of those got a handshake before the end of February.

“That is how you find out what is actually happening on the ground, straight from the people who are there, because they will tell you direct to your face and things don't get lost in translation,” says Dean.

There is a limit to his desire for consensus, however. “I like to take people with me,” he says. “But if it comes down to an issue where we can't do that then I'm quite happy to jump in and make a leadership decision on my own.”

Dean's role will be pivotal if the environment in the Northwest is to continue improving. The Environment Agency not only monitors and gathers vast amounts of data on the state of the environment, but also enforces environmental regulations. It's not afraid to land offenders in court.

There are, says Dean, four “foundation stones” on which the EA will build: financial performance, operational performance, health and safety and customer service.

These hint strongly at Dean's true background. Instead of coming up through the ranks at the agency, he was parachuted into one of its top jobs after building a successful career in business. Starting out in the chemicals industry he worked his way up to the position of general manager before being head hunted for a job on the board of Cleanaway, a large waste management company. He ultimately became managing director of its hazardous waste business based in Ellesmere Port, where he oversaw the installation of a £40 million state-of-the-art incinerator.

“We disposed of some of the nastiest chemicals – ones that can be made into chemical weapons. To safely get rid of 80,000 tonnes a year of very, very nasty chemicals is a great boon to the environment.”

As Dean points out, “Sometimes people on the public sector side of the environment don't give enough credit to people working in potentially polluting industries, who are just as likely to feel strongly about the environment as they do. There were members of Greenpeace working in the chemicals firm where I worked.” The switch to the public sector came when he got the job of regional director in the EA's Midlands area. But he commuted to work

“People in industry are just as likely to feel strongly about the environment.”

weekly from Cheshire, where he still lives, making his new job a kind of homecoming. So what can businesses in the Northwest expect from a man who used to be one of their own?

“We're going to influence more and regulate less ourselves,” he says. As Dean sees it, with the EA taking on more and more work it just doesn't have the resources to send environmental inspectors into all the newly affected sectors. The key for the future will be to work better with the agency's partner organisations, and regulate industrial sites on a risk-assessed basis, auditing the success of companies' own environmental improvement plans in many cases.

But perhaps the EA's most critical private sector relationship is with one of the region's biggest businesses, the water and electricity

supplier United Utilities. Dean candidly admits that the EA has a “very strange relationship with United Utilities where we both have the environment at heart, but we also have to remember that we are policing some of their operations. So that's a difficult tightrope to walk.”

Dean therefore wants a bit of common sense and compromise at the highest level on both sides. “I'd like to see it become a very strong relationship where we work together on matters of mutual environmental interest,” he says.

TURNING POINTS

1975 – Graduates from Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge with a Masters degree in chemical engineering and joins Coal Products Ltd as a graduate trainee.

1987 – Rises to the position of general manager at Coal Products' largest site, in Derbyshire.

1990 – Joins the board of Cleanaway Ltd, becoming managing director of its hazardous waste business four years later.

2001 – Founds Dean Weeks Consultants, an environmental consultancy firm.

2003 – Appointed regional director of the Environment Agency in the Midlands.

2005 – Moves to the Environment Agency's Northwest office as regional director.