

WORKING TOWARDS WORKING TOGETHER

One of the keys to a genuinely customer-centric public service lies in collaboration. So why is it that, despite many policy initiatives requiring collaboration, changes to a more collaborative, citizen-focused, public service haven't generally eventuated? NASI JENKIN and JAMES LOCKHART looked at the problem.



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Since the mid-1980s the quest for more value from the New Zealand public sector has resulted in a series of reforms. Recently these reforms have included the transformation from New Public Management (NPM) to Better Public Services (BPS), as introduced in 2012. There has been a cultural and structural shift to a whole-of-government approach, with a focus on results and outcomes and an explicit collaboration agenda, which provides opportunities for collaborative governance. Overall, it appears to have been a pretty steep learning curve for many.

In an attempt to evaluate why it's been so tough to change to a more collaborative, citizen-focused public service, we sought to identify the impediments to collaboration as understood by public service senior managers. The first theme to emerge from our research is that people (employees) are at the heart of the opportunity to collaborate, while the second theme was the requirement for a system-wide approach.

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Collaboration – what does it really mean?

Collaboration means different things to different people. It can sit anywhere on a continuum that spans “cooperation” of some sort through to full “service integration”. For example, some

managers in our research equated networking with collaboration. Although networking may lead to collaboration, they are certainly not the same thing. Considering the various literature definitions and the intentions summarised through the BPS reforms, collaboration means to work together through a facilitated process of decision making - talking together and sharing resources (people, things and ideas) - to achieve a common purpose. Often it is a temporary arrangement, but on occasions it becomes more permanent.

If you have been to a work meeting in Wellington you will have heard of the apparent virtues of collaboration. But what does this actually mean and how does it play out? There are some key issues that have to be considered. First, even though many practitioners appear to intuitively understand the principles guiding collaboration, implementation continues to be a struggle. Maybe this “intuitive” understanding has in itself been a cause of complacency to date, almost like I get it, now what? It is time to go beyond the intuitive and superficial and to develop understanding that is “robust, reflective and operable - that can be explained, taught, coached and implemented”.

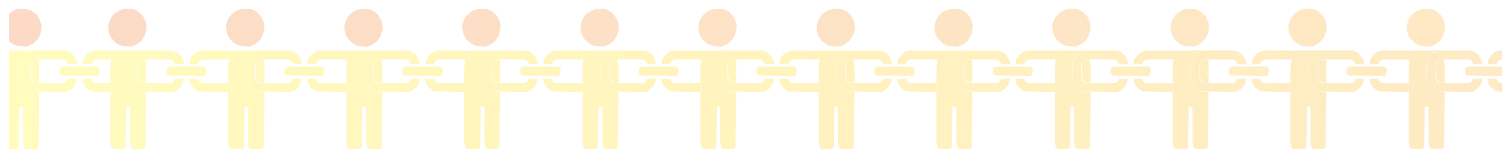
We have to also consider if collaboration is always the right solution. In short, it isn't. It is best suited to complex problems that demand effort to achieve a change. There has to be a shared purpose rooted in an agreed problem definition; not an inherited pre-determined problem definition either, but one that has been

identified through a collective, iterative and inclusive process, such as design thinking and which is highly likely to be systemic, or at least near-systemic. The desired outcomes determine who is involved in the process and trust is critical to success.

The apparent problems associated with collaboration across organisational silos are well versed, especially when we listened to many experts that initiated the early reforms. But to deliver the BPS outcomes, we need to go beyond in-house collaboration and focus on cross-sector collaborations, which are more complicated and challenging. This simply isn't an easy row to hoe.

You can think of collaboration like a chain: only as strong as its weakest link, at any given time and in any given situation. Sometimes an individual leader (anywhere in the system) stands in the gap and holds things together – but this is not a sustainable, long-term solution. Fundamentally, success is dependent on understanding all the parts of the package and each part working cohesively within the whole. We have to recognise that collaboration is not some linear process to follow and there is no road map. It is a complex adaptive system – so stuff impacts other stuff. If you are looking for one thing, you could miss another.

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An entirely new way of working

When we consider the trajectory of public sector reforms collaboration is essentially an entirely new way of working. Many leaders have come through a competitive system, but in this new arena success is dependent on a very specific skill set and a new style of leadership. Principles and good intentions are no longer enough.

Collaborative leadership necessitates an empowering approach, a comfort with ambiguity, and an ability to learn from failure. This is particularly tough in an environment with a dominant “fear of failure” and a reward system that favours “known knows”. We now need leaders with a new mindset – Carol Dweck of Stanford University calls this a “growth mindset” (as opposed to a “fixed mindset”) - while others have talked about “adaptive” behaviours. Whilst we did not undertake an evaluation of leadership styles in our research, nor of theory pertaining to styles of leadership, the results point to a desirable leadership style akin to servant leadership which is very much in line with the traditional public service ethos of public servants.

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At the heart of collaboration is a diversity and inclusion agenda, what we recognise as genuine inclusiveness. And, in the end, it's about people and lower-level politics. Too often the impact of human agency is underplayed. It is then no surprise that competitive self-interest thwarts the development of a shared purpose, especially when there is a shortage of trust. We have to find opportunities to link self-interest to shared interest... which is easier said than done.

A whole system approach

Taking a whole system approach means focusing on both organisational processes and outcomes. It means we have to make it easier to make decisions; complex governance mechanisms are unhelpful. There are both organisational and institutional tensions in a system designed for stability which is now looking to deliver agile, citizen-focused collaborative services. All evidence points to the fact that much of the value-added collaboration comes from a small percentage of employees (one research says

as little as 3% to 5%). Therefore, considering structural changes to “shift decision rights to more appropriate people” in the system (amongst other considerations) could be a significant enabler for collaboration. The challenge for leaders under these circumstances is to identify, enable and empower these successful collaborators across the New Zealand public sector to work towards the desired BPS outcomes.

In their chapter entitled, “Enhancing public innovation through collaboration, leadership and new public governance”, Sørensen and Torfing identified that “the enhancement of collaborative forms of social innovation calls for a transformation of the entire system of public governance that shifts the balance from New Public Management towards New Public Governance”. Therefore, if the system is not designed for collaboration, as identified by respondents in our research (a finding which incidentally is supported by wider global research), then expecting a different outcome within the existing system is tantamount to “magical thinking”. Similarly, merely adapting the system is likely to add limited value and continue to impede progress towards genuine, customer-focused service delivery.

In an environment with complex social problems, the need is to identify new opportunities to accelerate collaborative efforts. Identifying where to invest requires maturity in evidencing effective collaboration, and system mapping of initiatives to identify the end-to-end line of sight for success; and, indeed, the ability to learn from failure. The focus needs to be on recognising and promoting the right kinds of collaborative work (rather than simply the number of initiatives – a box-ticking exercise in futility). The public sector needs to be brave and innovative; it needs to identify areas where collaboration could have a real impact.

When we looked at international and national good practice examples, we found success stories included collaborative governance and an extended leadership model. There were shared measures, incentives and funding models. We also found that many frameworks utilise independent “back bone” support systems for collaboration projects. Fundamentally, system collaboration is about optimising the collective impact of individual agency efforts to deliver shared value.

Key opportunities

Most significantly, we identified an absence of a public sector collaborative model/framework and a gap of professionals trained/skilled in collaboration – and there was a call from participants for both. We learnt that there is an evident need to assess the current state and develop a collaboration framework that draws on learning from a variety of theories/practices, but which remains contextually specific.

There are key opportunities for investment in learning and development approaches; and for a programme of work that has intentionality around culture change. As one respondent said: “everyone would agree that culture is the secret source, the competitive advantage that connects, unites and makes communities happy – despite this importance we rarely bring an intentionality to culture...”

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We would never expect our rugby players to turn up on game day without due training... why do we expect this of managers and employees?

In conclusion, the current situation could be compared to the well known “iceberg principle” – there is so much more to the picture than what we often see. The focus tends to be on the tip of the iceberg and the rhetoric that guides activity. Moving from the tip of the iceberg requires intentionality; for many this will be an investment in developing self. For the sector the focus now needs to be on developing a model/framework that is context-specific, delivered by leaders and practitioners with the right training and tools. Just as the New Zealand public sector has a policy role and an understood mechanism for policy development, it now needs a professional collaboration role and mechanisms for collaboration that are sustainable.

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The article above draws on insights from her Massey MBA applied research project, “An analysis of key impediments to collaboration in the New Zealand public sector” completed earlier this year.

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