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Title: The Human, Learning, Systems approach to commissioning in complexity

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Introduction

It is now widely accepted that the realm of public service is complex (Haynes 2003, Bovaird 2008, Rhodes 2008; Lowe and Wilson 2017). The complex nature of public service has a number of profound consequences which public servants must address in order to successfully navigate this realm. This chapter will argue that in order to meet these challenges, public servants need new, complexity-informed tools with which to manage the provision of public service.

This chapter will explore what is required of commissioners in order to achieve the task of creating positive social outcomes (such as improved wellbeing, increased employment or reduced crime) in complex environments. It will explore this question through the lens of Public Sector Performance Measurement and Management (PSPMM), and how this has evolved towards increased complexity by moving from an output (activity) to an outcome (results) focus.

It will explore the different aspects of complexity that arise when seeking to commission activity which creates positive outcomes for citizens, and what a complexity-informed response requires. The chapter will then reflect on the way in which these requirements challenge existing public management arrangements, particularly in the field of PSPMM, as it applies to commissioning and performance management.

Finally, the chapter will identify the emergent “Human, Learning, Systems” (Lowe and Plimmer 2019) approach to the funding, commissioning and management of public service and provide examples of this approach in action.

The complex nature of creating public service outcomes

It is increasingly common in the broader management literature to understand that managing any 21st Century organisation is a complex task. This can be seen in the prominence of literature concerning management in Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous (VUCA) contexts (Johansen and Euchner 2013, Bennett and Lemoine 2014).

We argue that there are four aspects of complexity which such problems present for commissioners who want to achieve positive outcomes:

- Experiential complexity, which results from the variation in how outcomes are experienced by individuals, and the multiplicity of pathways to shared outcomes across the population
- Compositional complexity, which results from the interdependence and interdeterminance of causal factors leading to the creation of outcomes

- Dynamic complexity, which results from the coevolution of interacting factors and the instability inherent to complex systems
- Governance complexity, which results from the autonomy of public service organisations and other agents, increased by the fragmentation of modern public service landscapes

These aspects of complexity manifest in particular challenges for commissioners. We will explore the detail of how these challenges manifest in respect of the provision of “human services” – the aspect of public service which involves the provision of services to identifiable people. Human services therefore includes activity such as social care provision, healthcare, employment support, criminal justice, education. We use human services as a lens with which to consider the complexity of public service because it is within this context that the variety of human need and experience is clearest to see. We believe that the sources of complexity identified above also apply to other aspects of public service, such as the provision of public infrastructure (transport etc) or economic development, but the aspects of complexity in these areas would need to be explored separately in order to develop a contexts-specific understanding.

The purpose of commissioning - to create positive social outcomes

Before we explore the nature of complexity in public service, we should identify our starting assumptions about the purpose of public service, in the human services context. We will take as our starting point the currently dominant perspective - that the purpose of “human services” is to create positive social outcomes (Friedman 2009, Lowe 2013; Lowe and Wilson 2017; Borgonovi et al 2018). For example, in the field of social care, the outcome that people seek could be increased wellbeing; in the area of employment support, the desired outcome could be a greater number of people in work.

We can see this purpose manifest in the field of PSPMM. Essentially, PSPMM addresses the question: what should public servants be held accountable for? Over the past 30 years there has been an evolution of PSPMM systems. Early PSPMM systems were predominantly concerned with output control and process efficiency (Hood 1991; Heinrich 2010), and adopted indicators of input, throughput and output as the basis for performance appraisal. Output-based PMM systems became criticised for encouraging a narrow and introspective concern with organisational performance, which jarred with the increasingly fragmented governance landscape under New Public Management reforms, and the growing footprint of governance networks and partnerships as contributors of public value (Rhodes 1997). Outputs also failed to reflect a genuine concern with ‘what mattered’ to either the lives of service consumers, conflicting with NPM’s concern with customer choice and satisfaction (Heinrich 2002; van Thiel and Leeuw 2002).

Accordingly, PMM systems in the public and non-profit sectors have increasingly moved towards measures of ‘outcomes’, relating to the end value created by services and interventions (Schalock 2001; Heinrich 2002; Boyne and Law 2005; Borgonovi et al. 2018), as the trigger or incentivisation and decision making in PMM systems. Outcome-based performance management (OBPM) was seen to establish a focus on customer and societal value, and provided the appropriate level of performance indicator for forms of multi-organisational partnerships. Outcomes also supported a move away from a ‘command and control’ approach to PMM, encouraging managerial entrepreneurialism and helping establish driving an outcomes focus across whole organisations (Heinrich 2002).

Given that the purpose of this form of public service is to create such positive social outcomes, how does complexity manifest? And what is the necessary response of public service to this complexity?

Experiential complexity - Variety of demand

In the human services context, experiential complexity is most readily understood in terms of the variety of human needs, strengths and capacities with which public servants are faced when doing this work. In short, each person experiences an outcome in their lives differently – both in terms of the factors that contribute to it, and what that outcomes means to them.

Let us take the outcome of “wellbeing” as an example. What “wellbeing” means will be different to each person. Does socialising with others help create a sense of wellbeing, or do they like to be by themselves? (And given that the answer to this is likely to be ‘both, but at different times’, under what circumstances is each appropriate?) Does seeing their family promote their wellbeing, or should they be kept apart? Do they like being outside in nature, or do they prefer the cosy indoors?

Given that the purpose of social care service, for example, can be understood as developing the sense of wellbeing of the person being cared for, then this means that those responsible for this care must know, understand and respond to the particular combination of elements and factors which help to create a sense of well-being for each person.

Experiential complexity also results in ambiguity and uncertainty. Human variation creates a variety of perspectives within a social system – different perspectives as to ‘what matters’ to people, different perspectives on how needs should be met, different perspectives arising from access to, and interpretation of, the different information that is available to different people. This creates social systems in which it cannot be assumed that a “single point of truth” exists - a shared perspective on which everybody agrees.

Required response

The response required of public service to this aspect of complexity is outlined in Ashby’s Law of Requisite Variety (Ashby 1956) This Law states that if a system is to be stable, the number of states of its control mechanism must be greater than or equal to the number of states in the system being controlled. In our context, it can be most readily understood through the maxim “Variety absorbs variety” (Ashby 1956). In other words, in order to respond to variety in demand, public service must have at least as much variety in the support it offers to people.

This contains the following implications for public service:

- That public servants know and understand the variety with which they are faced. In a human service context, this means that they must know each individual they serve well enough to have a deep understanding of their strengths and needs. This requires a strong relationship between public servant and those they serve. For example, they must know whether seeing their family (which combination of family members, under what circumstances) will help to promote their wellbeing.
- That public servants have the autonomy to respond to variety. The public servant who has the relationship with the person concerned, and who has the in-depth knowledge of the variety of that demand, must have the autonomy to meet that demand in whatever way is appropriate. For example, if not seeing their parents is crucial to a person’s wellbeing, the public servant caring for them must have the autonomy to enable that to be the case; they

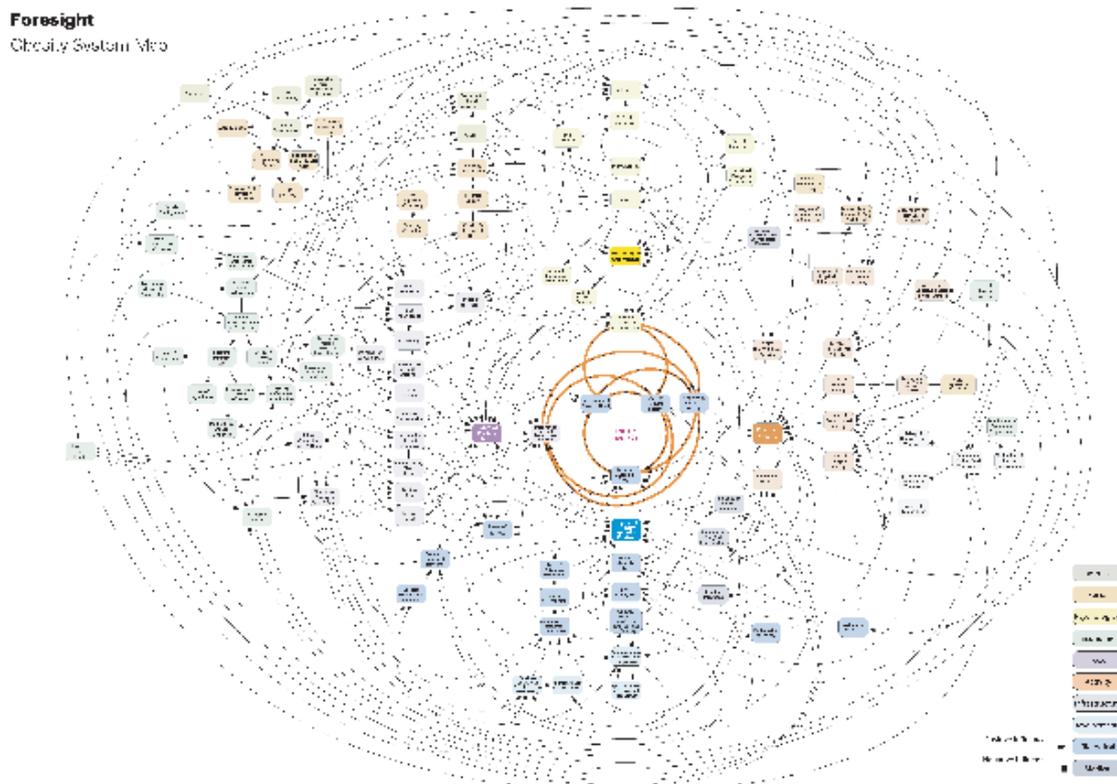
must not be bound by population-level rules which stipulate that parental access to their children promotes wellbeing.

- Autonomy requires trust – In order that public servants have the required autonomy to respond to variety, they must be trusted by those who are responsible for managing the work.
- The absence of an assumed single point of truth requires that all voices within a system are heard, so that differences in perspective are made visible and acknowledged. This is necessary so that shared perspectives are constructed, rather than assumed. They must be built through processes of dialogue and negotiation. For example, the desired outcomes for public service should not be assumed in advance, they must be discussed and negotiated both at a political level (what are the legitimate parameters of individual outcome choice? E.g. Are people allowed to choose their own death?) and within this scope, at an individual level.

Compositional complexity

Compositional complexity describes the aspect of complexity which describes the range of factors which contribute to creating an outcome in the world. An outcome in the world is produced by an enormous range of interdependent factors. Let us consider the challenge of obesity. The work undertaken by Vandebroek et al (2007) (Figure 1) illustrates that the outcome of obesity - whether people are obese or not - is the product of many interdependent factors. They illustrated this interdependence in the form of a causal-loop diagram:

Figure 1: A systems map of the causal relationships between the factors that create the outcome of obesity Vandebroek et al (2007)



This diagram perfectly illustrates that the social outcomes that public service seeks are created by complex systems – of many interdependent elements working in concert. Such systems exhibit emergent properties in which the patterns of behaviour of the whole system (for example, whether it results in obesity or not) are not reliably predictable, even if everything is known about the constituent parts. It is therefore appropriate to say that outcomes are emergent properties of complex systems.

Required response

Finally, emergence and uncertainty requires a different role for “evidence” in public service, and particularly for evaluation. In complex environments where results are emergent, it is not possible for evaluation evidence to play one of the roles that has classically been demanded of it – to find what works to produce desired social outcomes so that resources can be allocated to programmes that work, rather than ones that don’t (Shallock 2001) – because the results produced were contingent on the exact sequence of interactions and relationships between elements in that system at that point in time.

Instead, in complex environments, evaluation and evidence are required to play a different role (Mowles 2014; Ivaldi et al 2015). They are tools by which those doing the work reflect, learn and improve. They are learning tools for public servants undertaking the work, rather than information which informs purchasing decisions.

Dynamic complexity

Complex systems are dynamic. They change over time, and they change in unpredictable ways. It is not just that the patterns of behaviour of the elements of complex systems are subject to change, the patterns of the whole system are also liable to change. A system which was chaotic may flip into a stable state, with seemingly reliable patterns (Boulton et al 2015). Likewise, a stable system might suddenly become unstable. This is significant when seeking to create positive social outcomes. It means that ‘what works’ to create an outcome for one person in one place will not necessarily work or a different person in another place. It means that ‘what works’ for one person at one point in time, may not work for that same person at a different time. For example, the combination of housing, welfare payments, mental health support, employment and substance misuse support that enables one homeless person to stabilise their lives and manage a stable tenancy may not work for a different person in a different place. And it may not work for the same person at two different points in their life.

Required response

The required response to dynamicity is to treat public service as an on-going learning process, a learning process which never arrives at “the answer”. This means that human services need to shift away from offering standardised and fixed responses which take the form, if X is true then we do Y. Public service is required to adapt to changes in context. It turns each encounter between a public servant and the people they serve into a learning situation. And building on the required response to ambiguity, it must be a learning situation in which the public servant and those they serve construct their learning together.

The key shift here for public service is a requirement to shift from a version of management which seeks control over processes which are known to work, and to a version of management which enables experimentation and learning. This can be seen as extension of the required response to

variety. As well as being able to know, understand and have the autonomy to respond to variety of demand, they must have learning mechanisms in place to be able to adapt their response as circumstances change. They must have the learning capacity to recognise change in relevant circumstances, and the ability to reflect on their practice using data and sense-making methods that enable on-going adaptation.

Governance complexity

The emergent patterns of results produced by complex systems also highlights another aspect of complexity – that results produced by complex systems are beyond the control of any element of that system. The results of complex systems cannot be controlled, they can only be shaped and influenced. For example, a Local Authority may desire to reduce obesity in the area for which it is responsible. However, obesity (as we see in Figure 1 above) is significantly influenced by a range of factors beyond the control or influence of the Local Authority, for example the types of food that are created and distributed, or how food, exercise and body image are represented in the media.

Required response

If the outcomes produced by complex systems are beyond the control of any of the actors in the system, the required response seems to be that actors are able to shape patterns of behaviour in a system (Bellavita 2006) rather than attempting to control that behaviour. It also suggests that those seeking to create desired outcomes pay attention to the extent to which actors in the system are able to co-ordinate and collaborate effectively. We can refer to the extent of this ability to co-ordinate and collaborate as the “health” of the system.

How do the requirements of complexity fit with current public service management practice?

We will look at the changes that these requirements place on public service through the lens of Performance Management practice, as it impacts on the funding, commissioning and delivery of public service interventions.

An end to target-based PM

The required response from public service to these manifestations of complexity concerns Performance Management mechanisms. If desired social outcomes – such as reduced obesity, or increased employment, or wellbeing - are emergent properties of complex systems, then it means that outcomes are not “delivered” by people, organisations or programmes of activity. This means that Performance Management cannot hold people, teams, organisations or programmes accountable for producing such outcomes, because to do so would be holding them accountable for things they do not control.

Further, this analysis also suggests that it is a mistake to set pre-defined targets by which to monitor the performance of people who have to make context-sensitive decisions. The desire to set pre-defined targets comes from a ‘control’ mentality (Bourne et al 2017) associated with Principal-Agent Theory (PAT) (Davis, Schoorman, and Donaldson L, 1997). In PSPMM, this has manifested in the belief that public servants must have their autonomy constrained by targets in order to focus their time and attention on appropriate activities, for fear that if they do not have their autonomy so constrained, they will act on their own interest (rather than the public interest). This was famously expressed in terms of the necessity of avoiding “knave”-like behaviour amongst public servants by Le Grand (2010).

In complex environments, however, principals cannot effectively constrain the autonomy of agents without undermining their ability to respond to the challenges of variety and dynamism. This requires a shift in the underpinning theory for public service performance management from PAT to Stewardship Theory (Davis, Schoorman, and Donaldson L, 1997; Schillemans 2013) in which public servants, and those who have authority over them, are viewed as having shared stewardship of the systems which produce social outcomes.

The need to respond to interdependence, variety and dynamism also requires an end to prescriptive commissioning practice. Where public services are “commissioned” (that is, where they are subject to a purchaser/provider split), commissioners are currently encouraged to specify what is required of a service, either in terms of outputs (the activity that the service should undertake) or outcomes (the results that the activity should achieve). Whether outputs or outcomes (or combinations of these), the service specifications should be expressed in terms of metrics which the commissioner can then use to monitor performance of the provider – are they delivering what they promised to deliver? This is expressed in the “commissioning cycle” of the UK National Health Service (2019), in Figure 2.

Figure 2: the NHS Commissioning Cycle



Courtesy of The NHS Information Centre for health and social care. Full diagram available at: www.ic.nhs.uk/commissioning

However, responding to the interdependence of outcomes requires that particular service providers (or even combinations of service providers) cannot be held accountable for “delivering” outcomes, because outcomes are not delivered by services, they are emergent properties of a broader complex system. Attempting to hold services accountable for outcomes results in gaming of the system (Lowe

and Wilson 2017), in which service providers learn to manipulate data in order to respond to demands to be accountable for outcomes they do not control.

If output (activity) metrics are used to specify contracts, then those services cannot respond effectively to the variety of human strengths and need, and the changing nature of that strength and need. Since neither output nor outcome specification enables an effective response to complexity, an alternative approach is required.

[An emerging alternative: Human, Learning, Systems approach.](#)

In the UK, a conversation has begun amongst public servants about how to navigate complexity more effectively (Davidson-Knight et al 2017, Lowe and Plimmer 2019; Knowledge Hub Complexities Group). This conversation has identified a “Human, Learning, Systems” (HLS) approach (Lowe and Plimmer 2019) which creates an alternative paradigm for funding, commissioning and management of human service interventions in complex systems.

Human:

Complexity-consistent practice has in all cases encompassed a strong relational dimension with service ‘users’. To understand the variety of people’s needs and strengths to design appropriate services responses, being human-centred is required of practitioners. To trust public servants to behave with human compassion in their service delivery efforts rather than with self-interest, a faith in the goodness of human nature is also required of managers. It has been found that management practice which is implicitly guided by the underpinning assumptions of New Public Management can crowd out the importance of human relationships, and many public service employees in the empirical work spoke of being deeply uncomfortable with what could be considered common practice, and instead call for the need to ‘be more human’ (Lowe and Plimmer 2019).

To explore in further detail what this means, the mnemonic ‘VEST’ – Variety, Empathy, Strengths and Trust - captures what this means in practice. This is an approach which:

- recognises the Variety of human strengths, needs and experiences
- builds Empathy between people – so that they recognise, and seek to act on, the emotional and physical needs of others
- uses Strengths-based approaches – recognising and building on the assets (rather than deficits) of people and places
- Trusts public servants to act on their intrinsic motivation to help others and get better at what they do.

Learning

‘Learning’ is a continuous process of adaptation throughout the lifecycle of public service planning, implementation and evaluation. The business literature places learning as a key engine of service improvement in complex environments (Mintzberg and Waters 1985; Bourne et al. 2017). Lowe and French (2018) also position learning (rather than ‘evidence’) as central to responding to complexity but make the challenge that learning also necessitates moving away from results-based accountability relationships. Lowe and Plimmer (2009) contrast this approach with a process of social innovation in which a public service problem is identified, and experiments are undertaken to identify “what works” in relation to that challenge, and then when “what works” is known, that solution is taken to scale (Lowe and Plimmer 2019, p. 15; Young Foundation 2012, p. 33).

By contrast, the HLS approach identifies the following ways in which an on-going learning approach is operationalised (Lowe and Plimmer 2019):

- An iterative, experimental approach to working with people

- Funding and commissioning for learning, not services – shifting from commissioning specified services to funding organisations’ capacity to learn
- Using data to learn – using monitoring data for reflection, rather than target-based performance management
- Creating a learning culture – creating a “positive error culture” in which people are encouraged to talk with their peers about mistakes and uncertainties in their practice

Systems

The ‘systems’ approach begins with the perspective that outcomes are produced by systems, rather than delivered by organisations (Lowe and Plimmer 2019). Consequently, systems rather than organisations should be the platform for social interventions. Lowe and Plimmer (2009) identify the need for a “System Steward” role to ensure that systems can operate effectively to produce desired outcomes.

The report identifies aspects of the role that Systems Stewards play (Lowe and Plimmer 2019, p. 37-8). These include:

- Building relationships and trust between actors in a system
- Establishing shared purpose
- Developing behaviours, principles and behaviours

Further, the authors identify the critical role played by commissioners in System Stewardship. They assert that how commissioners distribute financial resources (for example, through competitive or collaborative processes) plays a crucial role in whether actors in a system can coordinate their activities effectively (Lowe and Plimmer 2019, p. 24)

We have identified examples of HLS practice which seem to satisfy the requirements of complexity outlined above.

Responding to Experiential complexity: Bespoke by Default

There has been a significant move towards the provision of human service that is “bespoke by default” (Lowe and Plimmer 2019). This refers to a form of relational practice in which the purpose of the support provider is create an effective human relationship with the person/people who require support, and then to respond appropriately to the strengths and needs that they discover through that relationship.

This “bespoke by default” approach was highlighted in the Buurtzorg model of nursing care in the Netherlands (Laloux 2014) in which groups of nurses form self-managing teams to provide appropriate response to the variety of needs they encounter in home-care settings. In the Buurtzorg example, nurses have authority to respond in whatever way they see fit to the people in their care. Each members actions and judgements are peer-reviewed by other members of the team in order to reflect on and improve performance (Laloux 2014).

In Gateshead, a Local Authority in the UK, a similar approach has been developed to create “Bespoke by default” public service. Beginning with experiments to respond differently to those who cannot pay their Council Tax (the UK’s local taxation mechanism) the Council has created Public Service Reform (PSR) teams with devolved authority to build relationships with citizens, and respond to the strengths and needs of those citizens in any way which “does no harm, and stays legal” (Lowe and Plimmer 2019).

“Most of the specific things that were done that helped people were small and unspectacular. A coffee, a chat, a food shop whilst benefits were being processed, a bus pass

to aid a job search (and just to get people out of the house), some basic clothes... They didn't need supplying for and assessing for, but were decisions made by the workers in the work based upon the specific context of the person and their situation." Public sector change leader (Lowe and Plimmer 2019)

A key aspect of this bespoke response is that it is not viewed as a distinct, standardised service. This has two key implications. Firstly, the 'service' has no access or eligibility criteria (anyone who asks for help is entitled to help). Secondly, there is no standardised set of activities which the team undertakes. This means that there is no manual to follow, and the PSR team role requires continuous learning in order to reflect on the appropriateness of the judgements being made by team members.

This bespoke response enabled the PSR team to create better outcomes for 30 of the 42 cases in their prototype. The majority of these people were previously known to public service in the Borough, but had been viewed as having complex, intractable needs which could not be effectively met through standard social care or health service responses.

Although it is too early to fully understand the cost implications of a bespoke response, early indications seem to suggest that it creates cost savings across the broader system. Cost savings seem to arise from reducing waste in the system in three ways: (Lowe and Plimmer 2019)

- Not helping people when they ask for help makes people's problems more entrenched and expensive to help later on.
- Not helping people itself costs money. Providing a standardised service which does not meet the strengths and needs of the people who use it mean that scarce resources are wasted providing the wrong thing. This fits with other evidence that there are significant diseconomies of scale (Locality) when providing responses to human need.
- Turning people away from help costs money. Assessment processes which decide whether people's problems are serious enough in order to provide support themselves cost money

From their initial six month prototype the Gateshead team were further able to identify potential cost savings from amongst the people they had supported: (Lowe and Plimmer 2019)

- The reduction of the likelihood of a child requiring statutory care services. A near crisis has become stable and improving without any intervention from acute services.
- Four people were self-harming and two had considered suicide. Two of these are still struggling but four are improving.
- Seven people had found work or better-paid and/or more sustainable work thus moving off or needing fewer benefits.
- Three had started to claim benefits when they had no income but were eligible for help, thus reducing the strain on crisis services.
- Five people related to those in the prototype but not within it themselves have also found work or maximised their income to match their entitlement such that they can better position themselves to find work.
- One person was being financially abused and living in poverty that was materially damaging their health. This trajectory has been dramatically turned around to remove the potential need for sustained acute services

- Fourteen people are engaging in mental health and/or addiction and recovery support that were previously not engaging with any form of mental health support. Ten of them are responding positively and taking more control of their lives

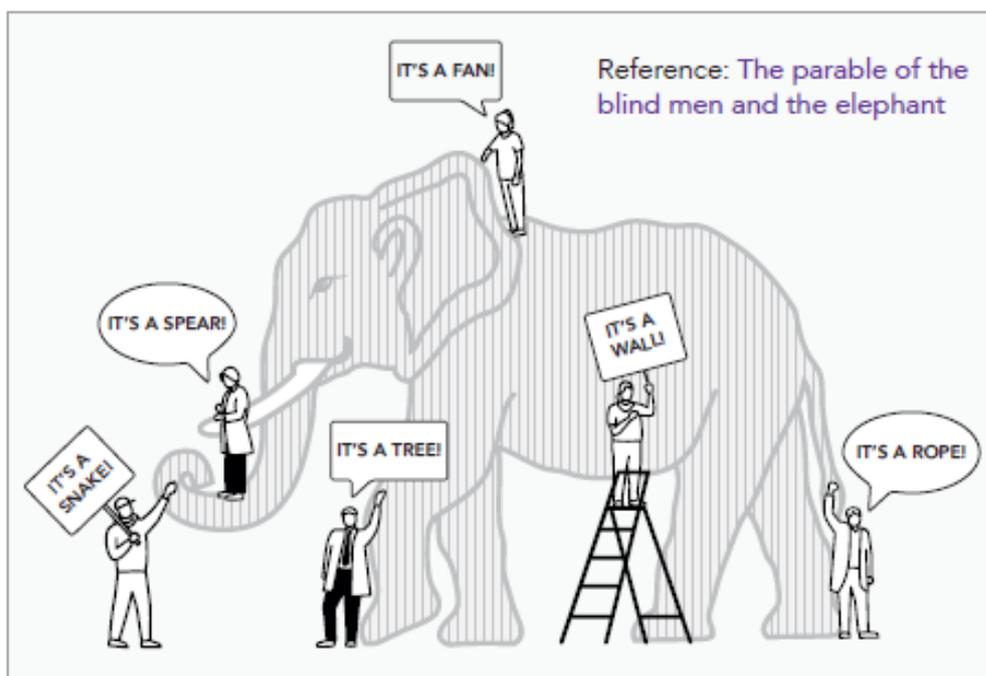
Responding to compositional complexity : Acknowledging multiple perspectives and negotiating shared purpose

An example of a response to the uncertainty which arises from compositional complexity comes from the city of York in the UK (French and Lowe 2018). A number of different public services which served the city of York (housing, emergency services, mental health, social care and homelessness) were all conducting simultaneous system change programmes. Each of these system change programmes was attempting to get the other services to re-orientate around their perspective and priorities.

Through the intervention of a System Change Associate (French and Lowe 2018) each of these system change programmes was able to identify that their perspective on the system was only partial, and that they needed to be able to hear and recognise multiple different perspectives in order to enable more effective collaboration. Consequently, the public servants in York found themselves in the position of the people in the traditional Indian parable (Figure 3) in which each person can only experience a part of the whole, and is unable to recognise the larger picture that multiple perspectives create.

Consequently, public services in York created a 'Multiple and Complex Needs Network' which brought together all of the respective players into a single conversation, which was able to develop a shared purpose across the actors.

Figure 3: The Parable of the Blind Man (Lowe and Plimmer 2019)



Responding to Dynamic complexity: Continuous learning and adaptation

In order to respond to dynamic complexity, one of the key changes that those who commission public services must address is that they must move away from purchasing specified services (e.g. service X will deliver activity Y to group Z) towards a position in which they 'purchase' the capacity of organisations to respond to the changing strengths and needs of the people they serve.

A powerful example of this approach in action is provided by Plymouth City Council and the local Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG – the body responsible for commissioning healthcare services in the locality). In Plymouth, the contract for provision of support to vulnerable adults does not specify outputs or outcomes to be achieved. Instead, it uses a set of agreed principles as the basis for how the system will function, including ongoing adaptation to support provision based on shared learning.

The key features of this commissioning process were: (Lowe and Plimmer 2019)

- The Council and Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) created an £80m, 10 year, shared budget to commission a health and care system for vulnerable adults in Plymouth
- The tender did not specify outputs or outcomes to be delivered. Instead, it focussed on collaboration and learning together.
- This was tendered through an Alliance contract model whereby organisations in the city came together to create a shared response – where organisations are jointly liable for the performance of the contract
- Following the tender process the Council became a signatory to the Alliance, formally recognising that they are part of the system
- The tendering process was conducted as a series of design conversations between the commissioners and providers in the Alliance, from which a set of core service principles and activities emerged.
- The signed Alliance contract does not specify outputs or outcomes to be achieved. Instead, it uses a set of agreed principles as the basis for how the Alliance will function. The details of the service provision are subject to continued adaptation based on shared learning.
- This commissioning process was made possible by four years of system change work, which built relationships of trust between the actors involved.

In this form of commissioning, the contract between commissioner and the alliance of organisations who are providing services does not specify Key Performance Indicators, or other targets to be achieved. Instead, the commissioner holds the provider organisations accountable for the quality of their learning and adaptation:

“We want to work with provider(s) to measure and reflect on the outcomes that the system is producing, in order to help the system continuously adapt and improve, and to help organisations understand their particular contributions to these outcomes.” Plymouth Council Tender specification document (Lowe and Plimmer 2019)

“[The commissioner] didn't specify activities, staffing, where we had to deliver from. Instead they said, 'let's see how we can do this together.' ... It's about working together to work out where people are coming from, why things are the way they are, developing new models. It's about all learning together.” Plymouth Provider (Lowe and Plimmer 2019)

Responding to Governance complexity

The Lankelly Chase Foundation (LCF) provide an interesting example of a response to the lack of control inherent in governing situations that do not have a single, central locus of authority. LCF are a UK-based charitable foundation which distributes approximately £10m per year in resources to create systemic change for people who experience severe and multiple disadvantage in the UK (LCF).

They have created an 'Action Inquiry' (French and Lowe 2018) to explore how to achieve systems change in how places function as systems to support people who have experienced severe and multiple disadvantage. Underpinning the inquiry are nine 'System Behaviours' (French and Lowe 2018) which describe the behaviour of actors in a 'healthy' system. These System Behaviours concern Perspective, Power and Participation in a place-as-system (French and Lowe 2018):

Perspective

- People view themselves as part of an interconnected whole
- People are viewed as resourceful and bringing strengths
- People share a vision

Power

- Power is shared, and equality of voice actively promoted
- Decision-making is devolved
- Accountability is mutual

Participation

- Open, trusting relationships enable effective dialogue
- Leadership is collaborative and promoted at every level
- Feedback and collective learning drive adaptation

LCF's Inquiry begins with the hypothesis that if actors in a system exhibit these Behaviours, then the system will better help meet the strengths and needs of people who have experienced severe and multiple disadvantage. The idea is that these Behaviours function as principles which enable effective co-ordination and collaboration in places-as-systems. Hence they provide a mechanism for co-ordination and collaboration in the absence of central authority.

To enable this co-ordination a number of the places which are part of the Inquiry are adopting the idea of System Stewardship (Hallsworth 2011; French and Lowe 2018; Lowe and Plimmer 2019). This defines the role of System Steward as a person (or group of people) who take responsibility for the 'health' of a system (in this case, whether the System Behaviours are manifest) and who co-ordinate action to understand and promote the health of a system (French and Lowe 2018). This co-ordinating role seems to play a crucial role in responding to governance complexity.

Conclusion

Effectively navigating complexity seems to require that public servants adopt a new paradigm for public management – one which leaves behind the conceptual underpinnings of New Public Management – underpinnings which seek to control public servants and limit their autonomy for fear of unleashing a wave of selfish, "knave"-like ("Le Grand 2003) behaviours.

On the contrary, navigating complexity requires that public servants are trusted to use their autonomy to act as stewards of common, public goals. It requires that they are able to respond to the enormous variety of human strengths, needs and experiences. It requires that they are able to shape patterns in complex systems which are beyond their control, by finding and promoting behaviours which promote collaboration and co-ordination of activity. It requires that public servants are able to respond to ambiguity and uncertainty by undertaking activity which enables

actors in systems to see the world from one another's perspectives. And it requires that learning is a continuous process of adaptation, in which people are freed from the responsibility to deliver pre-defined targets, and are instead resourced to learn and adapt to constantly changing contexts. This approach has been identified as HLS approach (Lowe and Plimmer 2019).

We have seen examples of each of what it means to meet each of these requirements in practice. None of these examples provide a complete map to enable complexity to be navigated successfully. However, they function as navigation aids, as points of reference which help to provide familiar landmarks in complex terrain. The commissioners of the 21st century will add to this map with each experiment they make in adopting a HLS approach.

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