A relational perspective on public sector management

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Introduction

In the 1990s a critique grew of how management in the public sector was developing. The concern was that a limited approach to management that, for example, focused on narrow targets would fail to relate to the complexity and dynamism of society, much public service work and people's lives, and which, thus, could not deliver better, more responsive public services. Further, the argument developed that such an inadequate style of management would even undermine both public trust in services/professionals, and a strong public service ethos that could help to improve services. Despite the criticisms, this approach to management grew across the public sector in Britain. Whilst government's rarely rely on one approach to organising the public sector, this narrow approach to management did become a dominant method through the 1990s and early 2000s in an attempt to ostensibly demonstrate control over and accountability for spending on public services.

In the following I will give a brief overview of this critique. I will then outline the importance and potential contribution of a relational approach to leading and managing in the public sector.

Critiquing how public sector management has developed

There are 2 strands of critique with regard to the public sector to mention as they overlap, but are distinct. The first is the critique of how management of the public sector has developed. The second is a critique of the growth of the public sector. The latter is the kind of critique at the heart of, for example, the notion of the Big Society, i.e. that the public sector has grown too big and trampled on other (better, it is argued) forms of civil engagement and organisation. It is the former critique that is my concern here, though these 2 critiques have been used together by some and there is also a 'relational' perspective on the concerns in the second perspective.

The goal here is not to systematically catalogue each stage and element in the critique of a certain form of public sector management, but rather to set out some key authors and insights. Michael Power (1996 & 1999), for example, commented on the growth of auditing bodies and processes and critiqued the ways in which they sought to increase accountability and transparency. He argued that often the explosion of auditing actually undermined these goals by making people more suspicious of services and people working in them.

Others wrote about the spread of New Public Management (NPM) (e.g. Hood 1990 & Clarke & Newman 1997) – an ideology of managerialism and set of practices that proposed an increase in the amount of management, the autonomy of managers over others, the setting of measures of performance (often in very narrow terms) and management against their delivery. The approach is one of command and control from central points in the system down a rigid hierarchy. In the public sector, this approach was widely proposed and enacted as an improvement to old, public administration and service ethos approaches to organising. NPM 'has been the guiding intellectual paradigm for the reform and governance of public services over the last three decades' (Cooke & Muir 2012:5).The possible benefits of this NPM approach to, for example, achieving short-term

goals, were often over amplified, and the limitations, such as addressing long-term, complex and uncertain issues and outcomes, were often ignored or downplayed.

Despite the critiques of these developments, the styles of organising and managing continued to spread. The notion of being 'evidence-based' often played in to these developments. Notwithstanding that one conception of the evidence-based approach is concerned with integrating the best available evidence with the knowledge of professionals and clients, the more simplistic notion of research evidence providing a definitive answer for all contexts took hold in policy and many aspects of public sector leadership and management.

In her 2002 BBC Reith Lectures *A Question of Trust,* Onora O'Neill (2002) discussed the place of trust in public life and dissected the shortcomings of management approaches, ultimately arguing that narrow management approaches undermine accountability and trust. She commented on the experience of being subjected to these developments:

> 'our new conceptions of accountability, which superimpose managerial targets on bureaucratic processes, burdening and even paralysing those who have to comply.' (p.18)
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> 'For all those of us in the public sector the new accountability takes the form of detailed control. An unending stream of new legislation and regulation, memoranda and instructions, guidance and advice floods into public sector institutions.' (pp. 45-6)
>
> 'The new accountability is widely experienced not just as *changing* but (I think) as *distorting the proper aims of professional practice* and indeed as damaging professional pride and integrity. Much professional practice used to centre on interaction with those whom professionals serve . . . . Now there is less time to do this because everyone has to record the details of what they do and compile the evidence to protect themselves . . . . ' (p. 50) (Original italics)

She also argued, similar to we saw above with Power, that this approach was actually counter-productive to its own stated goals:

> 'Perhaps the culture of accountability that we are relentlessly building for ourselves actually damages trust rather than supporting it.' (p.19)

A temptation in the development of this approach to management against narrow objectives is to end at the spread sheet and tick-box answer to managing, service delivery and accountability. A superficial level of data (the tick-box) on a spread sheet is seen to provide the evidence necessary to present a narrative of delivery, compliance, accountability and control. As Cooke and Muir (2012:7) commented on the use of narrow targets, it:

> 'risks reducing the complexity and texture of human experience to a simple number, leading to policies and services that do not address the core of a problem'

To delve deeper below the level of targets opens discussions up to more complexity and uncertainty, and undermines the image of control that, in this climate, helps many managers, leaders and politicians with their sense of security and career development. And it is easier to be deceptive (or

'game play' as it is euphemistically sometimes called) against superficial targets than against a deeper account of what you have done.

And the critiques of management culture and practice in the public sector continued, often illuminated by specific instances of failing. For example, the Munro (2011) review of developments in child protection argued that a failure to recognise the degree of uncertainty (and uncontrollability) in such work, coupled with narrow conceptions and measures of work for supposed greater accountability and transparency, have created the unintended consequence of setting obstacles to good practice. Discussing the history of general management and managerialism in the NHS since the 1980s, Jarman (2012) is critical of a system which, amongst many faults, shields managers from public accountability, has supported amongst staff the development of a culture of fear and compliance (rather than learning and improvement) and that harms patients. And there is evidence of a poor culture in parts of the NHS and a consequent neglect of individual care. The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (2011), for example, reported case studies of poor care in the NHS of older people and commented that the stories represented 'an ignominious failure to look beyond a patient's clinical condition and respond to the social and emotional needs of the individual and their family'. At the time of writing, the Francis Public Inquiry in to the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust is about to report and is expected to be damning of the impact of this style of management on patient care.

So, in the forgoing discussion we see there has been a long run and intellectually sustained critique of how the public sector has come to be managed. But what would the alternative look like, apart from 'not like what we have here'?

Towards a better model of managing

Components of an alternative approach to management in public services have been aired. Leadership has been proposed time after time as a solution to shortcomings in public services, to the point that it is in danger of becoming a commonsense notion devoid of real use in organising services. Leadership could mean many different things, including the proposal of a model simply designed to deliver more of the same management approach, narrow and reductionist, which is not a helpful way forward. Similarly, the model of the leader as the lone hero taking services forward is misguided and ignores crucial relational skills, teamwork and collaboration. Alternative models of leadership are, though, available. The philosophy of the servant leader, i.e. a leader focused on the well-being of others, is one example.

A systems thinking perspective (e.g. Seddon 2008) also has been proposed as an antidote to targets and rigid top-down management. In this prescription, the starting point for organising, and focus throughout, is the client/customer and what he/she wants from the organisation. Managers then need to set the system so that individuals within it have sufficient freedom to respond to what is needed. Hallsworth (2011) argues for a model of 'system stewardship' for central government (and others) which is characterised by more complex and nuanced approaches to overviewing a system and policy development and implementation beyond simple command and control approaches over narrow elements of the system.

Osborne et al (2012) also critique NPM, and especially for the inability of its reductionist perspective to cope with the kind of integrated approaches needed to address the public service needs of people

and the complex, wicked social problems public organisations are often facing today. They argue for a perspective that is grounded in recognising the dominant *service* feature of public sector organisations – with services being intangible and personal.

A more trust-based approach to public sector organisations is another dimension of an alternative model of management (e.g. Nyhan 2000 and O'Neil 2002). O'Neil (2002) argued for more personally active approaches to questions of trust, that involved recognition of the dynamic and personal element of *placing* trust in others, for intelligent accountability which allows a margin of professional self-governance within sensible frameworks appropriate to contexts, and for reporting systems in which people give an account of their work to others suitably independent and resourced to make a judgement about it. Not directly referencing, but to some degree echoing components of the system thinking perspective described above, O'Neil argued:

> 'If we want a culture of public service, professionals and public servants must in the end be free to serve the public rather than their paymasters.' (p. 59)

At the heart of these different perspectives is a better focus on *good relationships*. That is, relationships between the centre and the outer regions of public services and policy; relationships between managers and colleagues; and, very crucially, relationships between the public/clients/service users and those delivering the services. It also includes the focusing on the relationships between sources of knowledge (systematic research evidence, local knowledge, professional knowledge, and knowledge of individuals and how they are in the world) we have at hand to help inform better decisions. Placing this concern with relationships at the heart of organising public services would be a dramatic change from and improvement on NPM.

Bell & Smerdon (2011) called the returns from good relationships in public services 'Deep Value', characterised as:

> "a term that captures the value created when the human relationships between people delivering and people using public services are effective. In these relationships, it is the practical transfer of knowledge that creates the conditions for progress, but it is the deeper qualities of the human bond that nourish confidence, inspire self esteem, unlock potential, erode inequality and so have the power to transform." (p. 5)

In a similar vein, Bollen & Emes (2006:6) commented:

> 'public services need to do more than just understand people's needs – they also need to understand the nature of the relationship between user and provider, and appreciate the relational benefits which will deliver the best outcomes for both.'

From a review of the literature across public services, Bell & Smerdon (2011) found that the public put a high value on good relationships in their dealings with public services, that such a relationship is essential to a good user experience of services and, hence is linked to satisfaction and achieving outcomes. The specific manifestation of these relationships between public services and members of the public will differ between groups and contexts, but what remains is the focus on the relationship and the flexibility of professionals to adapt and respond to build the relationship. Bell & Smerdon (2011:37) conclude from their review of evidence across public services that the framework for good relationships from the service user's perspective is:

- Understanding – the provider takes time to understand the person and his/her needs and wishes;
- Collaboration – there is trust and confidence in each other;
- Commitment – when the provider demonstrates their commitment to the person and addressing needs;
- Communication – demonstrating good listening and the ability to draw out deeper issues;
- Empowerment – as relevant, support to the service user to challenge his/her thinking and make changes.
- Time – enough time to sufficiently develop the relationship;

This is a context in which people feel valued for themselves and feel this is driving the interaction, not some rigid, predetermined process.

In the context of health care, Hartzband and Groopman (2009) note a growing medical humanism movement explicitly concerned relationships between professionals and the patient as a person, focusing on everyone's values, goals and preferences pertinent to each clinical decision. More specifically, Woodbridge & Fulford (2004) have developed a 'values-based' approach to compliment an evidence-based one in mental health care. They argue that all decisions should be rooted in both (values and evidence) perspectives and sets of knowledge, and focused on the relationship between professionals and service users (and the values of both).

Cooke & Muir (2012) collated essays discussing a relational perspective to understanding the role of the state and public sector organisations. Like others discussed above, they assert the very limited view of a command and control and New Public Management approach to improving public services. The authors of these essays also argue that this type of management may actually be counterproductive and can damage public trust in public services.

A relational approach emphasises 'connectedness, complexity and mutuality' (Denham-Vaughan 2010:39). To understand this means to more fully understand a context, the actors involved and the environment – and the interconnectedness of all these elements. It also requires attention to the impact of action on these interconnections – the dynamism of organisations, individuals and society.

This concern with relationships allows a better understanding of context and complexity. It is not intended to set out a polarised view from some technical aspects of management and does not, for example, necessarily completely rule out the use of targets or other management tools. Such targets, however, are seen as partial as they are unlikely to completely capture the complexity of a situation. More fully informed discussions are needed to assess what the targets are telling you, and these necessitate trusting and open relationships.

Conclusion

The details of a better approach to managing in public services will in part depend on context – what kinds of services are we concerned with, what are the possibilities for engaging with different people in the organisation of those services, the degree of sustained interaction between people and those providing the service, etc. There are, though, some key principles emerging that will guide people to plan these details, including an explicit concern with active trust and improving relationships with people wherever possible.

There is a need to find a better blend and balance of what we might call the technical aspects of managing public services with the (inter)relational and values-base of people involved in services (Denham-Vaughan 2010; Bracken et al 2012). The contours of this blending, of what a relational approach would mean for the state and public services are still being debated and defined (Cooke & Muir 2012), and this process is in itself framing our understanding and experience of an approach focused on relationships. Good discussions and debates and collaborative working need open and trusting relationships.

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