Collaboration

Building new relationships for improved outcomes
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Introduction

As managers and leaders struggle to meet the demand for improvement in the delivery of public services, while facing the prospect of ever-diminishing resources, the concept of collaboration offers a potential solution towards delivering sustainable long-term benefits for citizens and service users. Leaders will need to nurture a culture of collaboration both within their teams and organisations and across a number of public service organisations. This publication explores the meaning and value of collaboration in the way services are designed and delivered, to encourage a fresh approach to thinking differently about meeting the needs of the citizen. It offers a template and some broad principles for collaborating successfully with others.

What is collaboration?

The term collaboration is used to describe a process where individuals with specific interests and areas of expertise combine their knowledge, wisdom and insight in an open and equal way to deliver an outcome that is relevant, appropriate and greater than the sum of its parts.

Collaboration implies some relinquishing of power, resources, people and control whilst retaining responsibility and accountability. Due to the technological developments of recent years it is now possible for teams to collaborate globally, in real time, on a project. This has revolutionised the scope and scale of collaborative projects.

“In the 21st century...organisations that can mobilise the intelligence, investment and imagination of their users will reap huge gains in cost, productivity, flexibility and innovation.”

*Leadbetter and Cottam*
Why collaborate?

The pressure to reorganise and add greater value to the delivery of public services is a universal condition affecting organisations everywhere. While services have improved substantially as a consequence of the developments in and better use of technology and the application of improved knowledge and skills, the drive to deliver even higher standards of provision remains a key feature of the tension underlying current public service delivery. Against this backdrop, citizens are more discerning and demanding, questioning the legitimacy and authority of organisations to decide what is best for others. The relationship between the user and provider can be fractious, difficult to manage and unsatisfying.

In responding to this situation, policy makers are faced with the challenge of developing big ideas that bring change rather than marginal improvement to the way public services address the needs of the citizen. This presents the challenge of engaging people within their locality while delivering better outcomes on a whole range of indicators at a national level. It is in this context that innovative methods such as collaboration (or variations of this concept such as co-creation, co-design or co-production) are breathing new life into traditional service delivery methods.

For much of the 20th Century, the model underpinning service delivery reinforced the role of the professional as someone who decided on behalf of others what and how services should be provided. This level of authority, which was largely attributable to the knowledge and expertise of the individual, produced services that were in general highly responsible and responsive to need. However, in design and delivery, they represented a product centred view of service value creation. With luck and good organisation, communication channels would be sufficiently healthy that feedback over time produced better and more tailored services. With hindsight, this model served an important purpose at a time when authoritative models of service delivery generated compliant forms of behaviour.

Within the past 15 years, the emergence of partnership models of delivery and an increased emphasis on the need for collaborative working has resulted in services that are designed in more collective and co-operative ways than ever before. Yet in the majority of cases these are still defined and controlled by the ‘producers’ with varying degrees of involvement from key stakeholders.

As a consequence, many public service organisations continue to process problems in a linear way following a ritualised top down or inside out value chain. However in reality, many of the issues public services are trying to address have multiple causes that overlap and often compound the effect of the problem or difficulty they are trying to resolve. It has become increasingly apparent that it is not within the gift of any single organisation to solve these problems using 20th Century public service technologies. Set against this evolving pattern of complexity, public service organisations must find new ways to engage communities in the design of their own solutions.
Building a new relationship with the citizen, service user and other organisations

Some citizens experience significant disparities in the quality of services and the way in which they are provided. They can feel disempowered, unheard and devalued during the process of delivery. Similarly, traditional patterns of delivery based upon ‘we know best’ models of service provision are often premised upon a mutual distrust of the citizen and service user. This extends to believing that the individual might not fully understand his or her own needs, want more than what is available or considered to be reasonable, and question the quality and manner in which services are being delivered. These perceptions undermine the relationship between the service provider and the citizen. They often lead to defensive and covert behaviours that degrade the ambition to deliver the highest quality services to those most in need. They also disempower the individual from taking greater responsibility for their own wellbeing.

This pattern of mistrust also manifests itself in inter-organisational relations between public service bodies. It is often embedded within the cultural DNA of an organisation and evident in departmental, divisional and team relationships. In these circumstances, traditional behaviours and habituated ways of thinking are based upon a platform of mistrust. A lack of strong trust and a clear shared vision will undermine the goal of collaborative working, no matter how excellent the project team or how extensive the resources. Strong trust and shared vision are the keystones to the success of a collaborative project.
The benefits of collaboration

Collaboration can help to restore trust and confidence between stakeholders. It can generate new ideas and new ways of thinking by drawing upon the knowledge, insight and lived experiences of those who receive services. It can expose opportunities for joint working that help to stretch and focus limited resources in the direction where they are most needed.

More importantly, it can help to build new relationships between stakeholders that are relatively uncontaminated by status, profession or power. Within a collaborative environment, interaction between different stakeholders becomes the locus of value creation and value extraction. As the measure of public value shifts to experiences and away from services or products, the insight and knowledge of the citizen as a service user becomes critical to delivering success.

An example of where this has worked successfully is in Coedpoeth, near Wrexham in North Wales where the Community Council, in deciding how to use its precept funds, asked the community to identify its priorities and agree a number of projects. Through a series of open meetings, projects were budgeted and presented based upon the combined knowledge and experience of all stakeholders. At the same time, a parallel prioritisation process was held with primary school children who also fed in their ideas for project proposals. The projects put forward were: a controlled pedestrian crossing, refurbishing the war memorial, improved seating in a public open space, tree planting, transport for a lunch club and improved sports facilities. This was the first instance of a community council using some of its precepts to fund a participatory budgeting project. The outcome was balanced in terms of priorities, inclusive of need and supportive of the community as a whole.

In many organisations teams deliver similar outcomes yet do so individually rather than using a collaborative approach. If we cannot collaborate within our organisations how will we fair with inter-organisational collaboration. Building a strong internal culture of delivering collaborative projects will develop our leadership skills allowing greater collaboration across a variety of public services.
How does collaboration differ from other forms of public service engagement?

Collaboration is a particular model of engagement that builds on a number of different communication approaches. Linked closely to cooperation, it is less adversarial and partisan than most recognised models of engagement. Outcomes are generated through consensus with minimal conflict because all stakeholders share responsibility for making decisions, carry equal status and are accountable to each other for delivery. However, this can present the most difficulties as many organisations wish to retain their dominant role within a collaboration project.

Therefore, because it is fundamentally a transformational model, emphasis is placed upon delivering outcomes rather than results with less adherence to transactional models of delivery.

The following model depicts the stages of evolution associated with developing a collaborative stakeholder approach from an original position of unilateral one-way traditional service provision. It highlights the nature of the relationship and the level of engagement between the service provider and recipient. Significantly, it plots a journey from low-level transaction to meaningful transformation involving all parties in a process that delivers a value greater than the sum of its parts.

“Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much” - Helen Keller
Utilising the potential for collaboration between the service professional and the service user will be critical to delivering service value beyond the framework of a traditional manufacturing model. It will connect the needs of the user and more importantly their lived experience of receiving services with those traditionally responsible for their delivery. Of equal significance, it will bring about a transformation of the relationship between both parties, sharing responsibility, liberating knowledge and expertise, and increasing long-term sustainability. Unlike co-production that focuses upon self-help and self-service models of delivery, collaboration forges a new relationship between the provider and recipient to deliver an outcome that is not predestined before the engagement begins.

Leadbetter and Cottam suggest that collaboration should be the platform for designing 21st Century public services, “in which users are participants in the design, creation and delivery of services, investing their time, effort and labour in the process, sharing some of the risks and responsibilities for outcomes with the professionals.”

There are alternative models designed to map the development of collaborative projects that show the stages that can be achieved either within organisations or across multi-service providers. The following options map shows the progression through cooperation, collaboration and integration. Many public service collaborations fail between cooperation and collaboration but this is where co-production could be used to successfully integrate a collaborative project into the culture of the organisations involved.
**Merge** – the merging of departments or business units into one. Operating under a single governance.

**Integrate** – Departments and business units operating within a shared umbrella to common policies and integrated processes. They retain some autonomy but are fully accountable to a shared Director.

**Commission** – A strategic business model where policy deployment, service design and sourcing are all integrated. Commissioning business models tend to take a whole system approach with focus on outcome.

**Collaborate** – Involves sharing common goals with other departments and business units. Agreement to share resources, typically people and services. Shared services are governed by SLAs rather than contract.

**Co-operate** – The alignment of department’s or business unit’s infrastructure eg sharing a business function or building or jointly contracting out to a third party. Covers out-sourcing and shared procurement arrangements.

**Co-ordinate** – Securing a department’s or business unit’s goals eg through co-ordination but not sharing of some services.

**Compete** – Sees other departments or business units as competitors in the organisation and seeks to secure a winning advantage over them.

Collaboration in many ways is not a new phenomenon; it’s just new to the way public service does business. In the world of communications technology, collaboration lies at the heart of the open source software movement where users are empowered to make their own changes and improvements to it. Ebay, Wikipedia and many other organisations use similar strategies of engagement to stay close to their customers and ensure that at all times they reflect the needs of the user. Twitter and Facebook are being used for consultation, surveys and poling of citizens e.g. NHS remodelling in West Wales. Monmouthshire County Council have adopted the use of twitter to allow service users to communicate their concerns and issues.
Collaboration as a source of Innovation

A number of thinkers have suggested that to innovate successfully user knowledge must be seen as important to the design process as new forms of technology and specialist knowledge. This reflects the changing role of government and public service organisations as social investment agencies, responding not just to the demand for better hospital and social care or education but the requirement to create healthy populations, a more educated citizenry and ensuring dignity and respect for vulnerable and dependent groups.

This shift in purpose requires a re-evaluation of the role of the citizen as a contributor to innovation, moving the emphasis away from promoting compliance and user obedience.

“For innovation in service or product development to be successful two kinds of ‘know how’ must be in evidence. Von Hippel describes these as user experience, including the context in which services are delivered and, expertise in creating technical solutions. The challenge for government and public service organisations is to ensure parity of value in relation to each of these fields of knowledge and to develop engagement strategies which bring the right people, into the right space, at the right time.”

(Parker, 2007)
Where does collaboration take place?

The opportunities to collaborate are endless, where those with an interest in the way services are designed and delivered come together. This space is often the overlapping territory between government, public service delivery agencies and the citizen as illustrated in the following diagram:

In this environment, the traditional lines of communication between the three primary stakeholders is cyclical with Government providing the framework in which services are delivered, delivery agencies defining the services to be provided and citizens providing feedback on their effectiveness. In each case there is an interaction between each party. However, it is possible to generate space and dialogue between the three stakeholders to create services as experiences that address the needs of the citizen. This is a transformational space, setting the framework, defining the services and providing feedback in real time.
The challenges of collaboration

Given the shift in power implied by collaboration, it is hardly surprising that there should be a number of behavioural, structural and procedural challenges to bring about the changes required. Tensions between this new kind of approach and traditional public service ways of working are inevitable and difficult to address. Key challenges include the following:

- How to co-create shared visions that are meaningful to whole communities and not just those working inside organisations and communicate these effectively to all collaborators
- How to develop a relationship based on strong trust and maintain this throughout any challenging issues
- How to establish the balance between the clarity and order of top-down approaches to strategy and the excitement and messiness of bottom-up aspirations
- Where and how to set targets on the continuum between the efficiencies of large-scale services and the effectiveness of smaller and localised self determined solutions
- How to bridge the gap between exploiting the freshness and possible naivety of new ideas brought by citizens and service users, and honouring the legacy of traditional service delivery that has for many years been the cornerstone of public service success.

These tensions and many others will require careful judgement, intuitive understanding, the ability to stand back and think in adaptive ways, to manage risk beyond existing safety margins and learn at the same time to fail intelligently.
Becoming collaborative

The following steps offer key stages in becoming more collaborative with other stakeholders. They offer a framework for creating the right conditions to deliver a process that maximises the contribution of all parties:

1. Evaluating the Collaborative Landscape
   • Creating opportunities
     Pro-actively seek out opportunities to collaborate, by identifying common interests and shared aspirations, or identifying situations where discontent from local users with existing services can be harnessed towards positive involvement in designing a new way of delivering. Identify if the organisation has an internal culture for collaboration and assigning a specific collaborative project manager to oversee all collaboration.
   • Creating the right environment and conditions
     Review the operating structure and terms of reference that often regulates engagement, the level of contribution, the distribution of power and the output within environments where stakeholders are invited to come together. Create a new platform of understanding and pattern of dialogue to facilitate conversations that are transformational and democratising.

2. Exploring Collaborative Opportunities
   • Creating outcomes and integrating ideas
     It is often easy to be distracted by differences between ideas and ways of thinking, and to generate solutions as a series of preferences or alternatives that are referenced in the need for consensus. Collaboration is a deeply innovative activity that is jointly owned and hallmarked by all parties. It should not be possible to see the trademark of any single organisation. Create open thinking space for ideas to surface and germinate. Avoid judgement and premature assessment of new or emerging ideas. Allow ideas to flow and connect through the lived experience of stakeholders.
   • Creating the communications process
     Be clear about the how stakeholders articulate their knowledge and expertise and demonstrate the value to experience as a legitimate source of intelligence. Be aware that conversations can default to processes where technical solutions relating to specific products and services are given greater credence than experience in determining outcomes.
3. Developing a Collaborative Culture

• Manage risk and uncertainty

Innovations such as collaboration can carry significant risk. The value and potential benefit of a collaborative idea is not to be measured in risk alone but in the expected outcome. Sharing risk equally among all parties will overcome the anxiety that some are carrying greater responsibility than others and help to build a common cause and interest. Find new ways to manage this risk intelligently at levels acceptable to all parties.

• Creating and managing infrastructures

Collaborated services can offer long-term sustainability, both in relation to the outcome and the skills used by stakeholders to generate transformational change. Long lasting success will be dependent upon developing the technologies and infrastructure to maintain relationships and deliver change to establish collaboration as the chosen model for service development and delivery. The collaboration must become part of the culture of the organisation.
Conclusion

Citizens as consumers are harder to please, more informed, active and assertive, better connected and networked than ever. So why not build on these trends rather than continue to struggle against them? By involving people in creating the services, this new kind of design sets out to increase the flow of information within and between people, organisations and communities. The use of social media can aid the communication between service users and service providers. A new way to think about design for services is to regard it as a process that stimulates continuous innovation among groups of people within continuously changing contexts. Services must adapt to the needs and aspirations of the citizens they serve and the localities in which they are set. Organisations will need to use their resources in a different way, to provide frameworks for collaboration and to facilitate dialogue between interested parties as well as acting as a conduit between end users and policy formulation at national and local levels.

The notion that organisations can alter the way they produce value has clear resonance in the world of public services. Indeed, it builds on the current debate about the benefits of collaboration by redefining the role of the citizen and community as net contributors to public service success. It also refreshes the meaning of engagement by suggesting that the services of the future might be more effective for having been created in partnership with their consumers and end users.

...To live so that which comes to me as seed goes to the next as blossom That which comes to me as blossom goes on as fruit.

Dawna Markova
References and recommended reading / resources:

Parker, S., & Parker S. (Ed.) 2006, Why Citizens hold the key to public service reform, Demos
www.participatorybudgeting.org.uk


Parker, S. (2007), Porous Government – Co-design as a route to innovation, Demos


Collaboration Sowing Seeds:
Co-creation created by Dr Neil Wooding, Corporate Director, ONS developed into Collaboration by Victoria Stockton, Leadership & OD Delivery Manager, Academi Wales Edited by Jo Carruthers, Director Academi Wales