

Collaboration and the Partnering Professional

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Abstract

The growing complexity of public problems and new forms of governance mean that strategic alliances, joint working relationships, partnerships and various forms of collaboration are prevalent on the public policy agenda. Public sector employees and managers are increasingly required to operate in environments where collaboration and partnership building are central to the design and delivery of services. These developments suggest a changing role for public sector employees and in turn, highlight the importance of a particular set of competencies for effectively managing in this environment. Much of the discourse around these collaborative arrangements has focused upon the institutional or partner level while relatively little attention has been paid to the competencies required by individual actors involved in developing and maintaining these arrangements. In this paper, we explore current directions in public sector governance and their implications for public sector leaders and professionals. Building on our experiences in working with public sector managers in this important area of work, we draw on existing literature to outline various skills and approaches that have proved useful in the development of effective collaborations, partnerships and alliances. Further research is required to increase our understanding of the impact of these arrangements in the public sector.

The Current Context

The public sector around the world has faced unprecedented change over the last two decades and the pace of change continues unabated. So much so, that many regard change as a given – rather like business as usual. Drivers of this change are often linked to the initiatives forged under the umbrella of New Public Management. These initiatives have spawned different ways of thinking about and managing the delivery of public services. Based on the need to reinvent and/or reform services and structures (e.g., Kettl, 1997; Osbourne & Gaebler, 1992), governments have developed a range of strategies including:

- Adoption of corporate frameworks
- Marketization of service delivery
- Outsourcing – separation of the contracting of services from service delivery
- Competitive tendering and contracting for service delivery
- Privatisation

- Corporatisation
- Public Private Partnerships

These trends have been discussed extensively in the literature (e.g., Australian Public Service Commission, 2003; Hernes, 2005; Mulgan, 2005; Paulsen, 2006; Williams, 2002) and will not be discussed in detail in this paper. Sufficient for our discussion is that this agenda and later variants of it (e.g., 'joined-up' government, network governance) continue to influence the form and reform of public service policy and service delivery.

Meanwhile, public policy and social issues have become increasingly complex and intractable. Issues such as climate change, poverty, homelessness, economic development, community safety, health and well being, cross organisational, jurisdictional, and professional boundaries. These problems are not amenable to optimal or global solutions and sometimes a potential solution unearths a link to some other problem in the wider system of interdependencies. Wicked problems (Head, 2008; Williams, 2002) therefore require innovative cross-jurisdictional and cross-boundary problem solving. Without effective collaboration with key stakeholders and clients, solutions to wicked problems are not likely to emerge – and even then, some solutions may only be relevant at a local level, once again highlighting the need for consultation with key stakeholders.

According to Williams (2002), the challenges of effective public sector governance and the wickedness of public policy issues imply that increased focus should be placed on building inter-organisational collaborative capacity with a reduced focus on intra-organisational imperatives. Furthermore, the public sector needs to develop a language of interconnectedness and interdependence or holistic thinking. By implication, the competence of public service professionals will rely less on professional or expert knowledge and more on relational and interpersonal attributes.

A New Role

Within this changing context, new forms of organising emerge (e.g., Public-Private Partnerships to deliver infrastructure megaprojects). Similarly, cross-sectoral partnerships have emerged as part of the service delivery landscape (e.g., between non-profits and private organisations). Across levels of government, community engagement and consultation processes are a fundamental part of the development and implementation of policy and service initiatives. These trends suggest new roles for practitioners and perhaps new ways of thinking about what it means to be a professional or public servant in these contexts (Sehested, 2002).

From a client perspective, there are more expectations than ever that service providers 'deliver', but to deliver in new ways. When clients talk about 'adding value', they are not just signalling that they want more for less money. They are asking for more finesse, more sophistication, and more authenticity in relationship. The days of being purely a service provider who might have State or Federal Government grants to administer are long gone. Increasingly, public sector officers are less focused on service delivery and more focused on brokering and enabling services to be deployed by and for others.

The challenge for service providers - and not only those from the public sector - is to build credibility and add value to clients in a new way. This approach requires professionals who are prepared to rethink their modus operandi and tailor their approach in order to transition

themselves to a new way of working. The transition is as much a philosophical and a social issue as it is a skills issue. Professionals need to learn to move beyond 'doing' to 'being'. The invitation is to be more than someone who exercises a 'role' to clients. Clients now expect and are entitled to professionals who can be authentic with them (Goffee & Jones 2006; Gilmore & Rine, 2007). Professionals need to engage with clients in a partnership that is 'true' (*authenticos*) but avoids co-dependence. Being skilled is one thing; being genuine is another.

Tensions may emerge in this new role as public service professional grapple with a prevailing logic of accountability and the logic of professional service provision (Paulsen, 2006). Using a competing values framework, Edwards et al. (2006) highlight that increased demands to adopt an external focus on clients coupled with a need for responsive flexibility often compete with the demands for internal control and accountability over resources. Nonetheless, this boundary spanning role, with an external and flexible focus on wicked problems (Acar, et al. 2007; Williams, 2002) requires a revitalised competence for collaboration.

Collaborative Competence

A range of literature is now emerging that discusses the importance of collaborative competencies. Collaborative competency frameworks have often emphasised the importance of organisational awareness, political savvy, networking, negotiation and influence, and relationship building.

In one example, Williams (2002) provides a list of competencies that emerged from his analysis of practitioners working in boundary spanner roles as coordinators in health promotion, community safety initiatives, and in local environment issues. In particular, he highlights the importance of the ability build sustainable relationships using effective communication, trust building, as well as understanding and empathy. Effective negotiation and influencing skills are also important. People who work in these contexts need to develop networks and build credibility with different stakeholders and interest groups. Consequently they need to have an appreciation of the complexity and interdependencies that surround the wicked problems with which they are dealing.

Similarly, Acar et al. (2007) conducted research which explored the competencies of partnership directors in the education sector. After conducting interviews with the partnership directors, they summarised the competency framework as the 9 C's:

- Communication skills
- Connectivity and connective skills
- Collaborative attitude and skills
- Convening and coordinating skills
- Congeniality and collegiality
- Caring for and championing clients
- Coaching and consulting skills
- Creativity
- Credibility

Acar et al. (2007) provide brief descriptions of each of these competencies. What is clear from these descriptions is that an ability to build and sustain relationships, a congenial disposition, along with a collaborative attitude are important aspects of this role. In this case, collaborative

attitude goes beyond simply behaving collaboratively; rather it is an attitude, a disposition, and starting point for interaction.

In a competency identification study, Getha-Taylor (2008) identified the core competencies that underpin the performance of superior collaborators in the US federal government. These competencies include interpersonal understanding, teamwork and collaborative skills, and team leadership. Interpersonal understanding relates to the ability to demonstrate empathy and understand the motivation of others. In this case, the ability to understand or 'read' others is an important component of effective collaboration. This emphasis highlights the importance of advanced communication skills, as well as emotional intelligence (Mayer & Salovey, 1993) in building partnerships. Furthermore, these findings imply that collaborative competence can be enhanced through the development of existing skill sets.

In the wider literature on strategic alliances in the private sector, Ertel (2001) goes one step further and suggests that alliance management or partnership management needs to become a distinct capability within firms. He argues that dedicated resources are required to effectively manage the challenges involved in effective partnerships and alliances.

The Implications

Do you just discover the right talent for this new role or can it be developed (Cheese et al 2008)? We are confident that you can 'teach old dogs new tricks' – with the right disposition to learning and with adequate challenge and support.

We have found that a combination of the following learning elements is helping public service officers make the transition to partnering professionalism.

- Stimulating workshop input
- Skills diagnosis (in EQ, communication styles, collaboration, network development)
- Case studies (enterprise, regional or international examples)
- Real-life conversations about relevant issues in partnership building
- Mentoring by those who have experience

We have worked with a number of public sector agencies who are selling to develop the competence of their staff in this area. These agencies have engaged in this range of activities to address this issue and to provide staff with frameworks for thinking about how to apply existing skills and how to develop new ways of thinking to engage effectively at this level. Furthermore, in our work with private sector organisations we increasingly note the importance of these competencies for developing internal, cross-silo collaboration, as well as external partnership and alliance building.

Final comments

Research and evaluation is required to explore the link between collaborative competencies and practices and service delivery innovation. To assist improved policy making, we need to demonstrate the value of collaborative approaches in grappling with wicked policy problems and service delivery issues in terms of outcomes 'on the ground'.

Given the intractable, multi-sectoral and complex nature of public policy challenges, innovative approaches are likely to develop in ways that address needs in localised contexts that make

sense for those involved. We cannot assume that such solutions are globally, or at least widely applicable. Nonetheless, lessons can be learned from what is being achieved and may be adapted for other contexts. Nonetheless, what remains critical to this discussion is the collaborative competence of those individuals who develop policy, oversight and implement policy. As the world of consulting and service excellence is becoming more sophisticated, we encourage ourselves and our colleagues to work towards sustainable and authentic partnerships.

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