# Changing Professional Behaviour: What Works

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## Introduction

This think piece focuses on the need for public services to change in order to meet the challenges of the 21st century and, in particular, the changes that are necessary in an organisation that wishes to build community resilience. As well as identifying the need for change, it explores some of the barriers and offers some insights to leaders in children's services that will help them to create the right organisational culture and behaviours to meet the changing landscape.

A note from the author....during this think piece I have used the terms public service and public sector interchangeably. The author recognizes that many "public type services" today are neither statutory nor delivered by local or central government. The author has raised key points that are generally relevant to these services and has used children service examples and case studies to emphasize the points in the hope that these are the most useful for the intended audience of the think piece.

## Why the need for change?

The challenges facing public services - the changing demographic, the rise in demand for services and reducing budgets - are well-rehearsed. It is commonplace to read in the sector press and national news that services are being withdrawn or people's needs are not being met. Whilst these pressures are at the forefront of everyone's mind, there are other pressing reasons as to why change is needed.

All of the "wicked issues" that central and local government are grappling with, do not have easy solutions. The term "wicked issues", resurrected more recently in public services to describe entrenched tricky issues such as the widening gap between the wealthy and poor, the lower educational outcomes for children from lower socio-economic backgrounds or reducing child poverty, was originally used in the 1970s. These issues are, however, just as prevalent today. Public services have a preference for conventional familiar approaches, especially when faced with relentless change. Whilst leaders, managers and professionals prefer to use previously employed courses of action, these have not worked in the past and are less likely to work in the future, especially with rising demand and reducing budget, (Cipd and PPMA)[1]. The landscape is constantly changing and with new conditions, come the need for different responses, both from policy makers and professionals delivering services.

The development of the welfare state post World War 2, established the notion of the state and professionals serving citizen's needs; professionalism, then and now, rested upon meeting clients' requirements. However, citizens have become far more self-determining. They decide when they want to shop, act as their own bankers and travel agents and so on. Yet public services have not kept pace with these changes. Whilst businesses utilise the

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value the customer brings, public services have been less quick to adapt to this changing relationship.

The fiscal context and rise in demand by citizens provide a stimulus for change as do the constantly evolving challenges facing society and public services. Responding to these challenges could result in better solutions that have not been fully considered previously. One has to ask whether reductions in budgets or rises in demand necessarily equate to poorer services. Developing a different type of relationship with citizens though co-production and gaining greater user insights provides an opportunity to reimagine the public services of the future and the role professionals would play. This article focuses on how this might be done.

## How does co-production affect user-professional relationships?

The phrase co-production was first coined in the 1970's by Elinor Ostrom of Indiana University[2]. She recognised that "services" were hugely reliant on the unacknowledged assets and efforts of service users as much as they were the expertise of professionals. She recognised that the lives of individuals were made up of a number of components such as experience, knowledge, relationships and skills which create the essential platforms on which services are overlayed. Individuals, families, society and communities are therefore not passive recipients of services but should be important agents in the design and delivery of services. Failure to recognise and embrace this, Ostrom argued, resulted in poorer services and poorer outcomes.

Co-production means a different relationship between users and professionals as it is:

*"a means to delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbours. Where activities are co-produced in this way, both services and neighbourhoods become more effective agents of change," (Boyle and Harris 2009[3])*

Boyle and Harris make the point that co-production is not consultation or participation but is about using the skills and experience of individuals to help themselves and each other. Supporters of co-production argue that people's needs are better met when they are involved in an equal and reciprocal relationship with professionals and others. However, working in this way is not the normal behaviour or structure of public service professionals, despite successive UK governments promoting empowerment and engagement in local communities. The designing of solutions has remained the preserve of the professional. Despite excellent examples of co-production emerging and a growing evidence base, the progress in this area has been slow.

Whilst the austerity measures and rising demand provide prompts for change, there is also an equally powerful evidenced-based argument as to why professionals and public services need to change. Quite simply, it is that solutions co-produced by users of these services are much more likely to meet their needs. An example of this approach is Family by Family; an Australian programme developed through The Australian Centre for Social Innovation. The programme, developed and delivered by families to address the high level of notifications to child protection, evidences the power of co-producing solutions and services.

Family by Family finds and trains families who have been through tough times, pairs them with families who want things to change, and coaches families to grow and change together. The model has been designed to help families thrive and not just survive. Some of the distinctive features of the model include:

– Family Focus: The unit of focus is the family - not just parents or children

– Whole family to whole family: Whole families are the primary deliverer of services - not professionals. Even peer-based programs, like volunteer home visiting programs, are parent led

– New role for professionals: Families are supported by a professional coach. Professionals serve in a behind-the-scene role, rather than a direct deliverer role. The coach brainstorms ideas and troubleshoots challenges.

2   Ostrom, E (1996). 'Crossing the Great Divide: Co-production, Synergy, and Development.' World Development 24(6):1073–1087.

3   Boyle and Harris (2009) "The Challenge of co-production" Nesta.

A section from their website is given below:

## Family by Family:-
## Our vision and mission

Our vision is to see all Australian families thrive, not just survive.

Thriving families are moving towards what they want; they try new things; plan for the future; connect family members to new opportunities; and offer positive feedback and mutual support.



the meaning of thriving came from families like us!!

We're about creating change- more than just creating friendships!

Our mission is to find, coach, and link-up families to develop each others' goals and connections.

Link-ups are how Family by Family works to enable thriving. Link-ups connect families who are going through tough times with families who have come out the other side. Together, families go new places, meet new people, and try new things. Through spending time with a family who has 'been there, done that', families experience other ways of doing family, learn new strategies and skills, and gain a sense of hope.

This service shows that even in a specialist area such as child protection, it is possible for professionals to change their role to help build resilience in families.
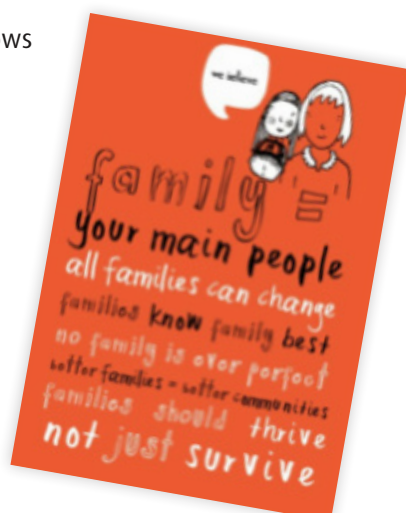


# Why is it so hard to change?

Today's public sector workers face a need for reinvention at a time when resources are shrinking, where there is uncertainty about outcomes and a low tolerance for error. Social policy since the New Labour years has driven public services into a competitive market (Kotter 2008)[4], pushing decentralisation and a mixed economy which is managed by local government, with arm's length assurance provided through regulation and inspection. This paradigm shift, focused on driving efficiency and effectiveness has resulted in some degree of change. However much of this change, such as merging education, children and adults social services, has not changed the underlying assumptions, values and cultural themes that constitute the operating culture of these organisations. (Potter, D. 2012)[5].

Cameron et al[6] provides a useful explanation as to why it is that the operating culture of the organisations has not changed despite successive policy drivers. He argues that there are two dimensions to organisations. These are:
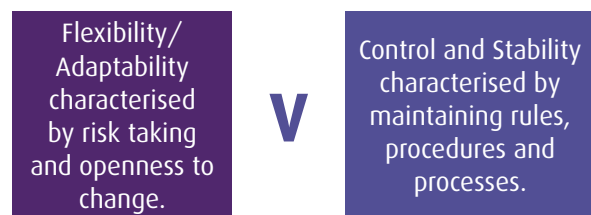
| Flexibility/ Adaptability characterised by risk taking and openness to change. | V | Control and Stability characterised by maintaining rules, procedures and processes. |
|---|---|---|

Figure 1.

And secondly;

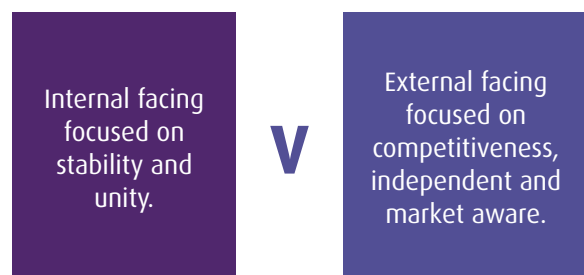| Internal facing focused on stability and unity. | V | External facing focused on competitiveness, independent and market aware. |
|---|---|---|

Figure 2.

The culture of public services has been one of incremental change and therefore falls into the 'hierarchy' organisational form. Windrum (2008)[7] argues that this is due to the political nature of local
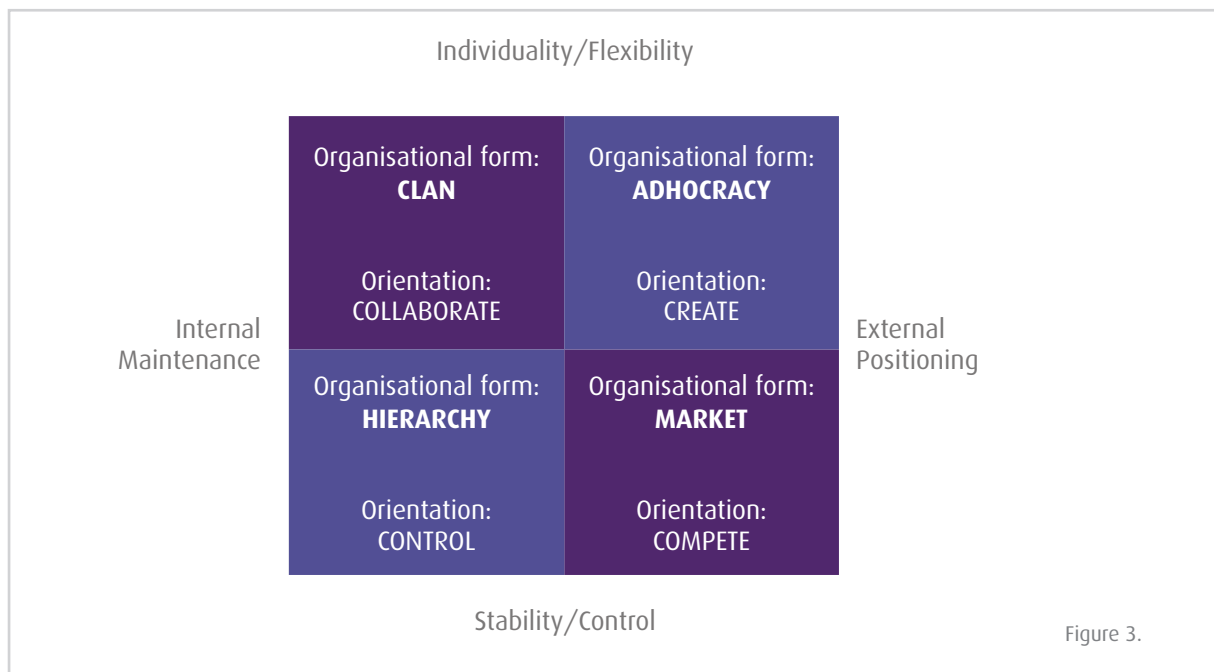
4   Kotter , J (2008) "A sense of urgency" Harvard Business Review. Boston, July to August pp 130 to 139.

5   Potter, D. http://www.culturalchange.co.uk/?p=1453).

6   Cameron K et al (2008) The Competing Values Framework: Creating value through purpose, practices, and people, University of Michigan: Creativity at Work.

7   Windrum P (2008) Innovation and entrepreneurship in public services, in Windrum P and Koch P (eds), Innovation in public sector services: entrepreneurship, creativity and management, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.

These 2 dimensions lead to four types of organisations as identified in the grid below.

**Individuality/Flexibility**

| | |
|---|---|
| Organisational form: **CLAN** Orientation: COLLABORATE | Organisational form: **ADHOCRACY** Orientation: CREATE |
| Organisational form: **HIERARCHY** Orientation: CONTROL | Organisational form: **MARKET** Orientation: COMPETE |

Internal Maintenance — External Positioning

**Stability/Control**

Figure 3.

government where public sector workers deliver public services as defined by politicians. This leads to public sector workers being reactive, responding to political activity and policy, as opposed to being more adaptive, risk taking and creative.

Parker and Bradley (2000)[8] argue that organisations need to have elements of all four cultures in order to thrive and, when one culture dominates it is more likely to be dysfunctional, and far less able to adapt and change. The greater and more novel the challenges, the more creative and transformative an organisation needs to be. (Upper right quadrant). However, when faced with an intolerance for error and a focus on controls, organisations such as children's services are understandably less likely to take risks and more likely to revert to the tried and tested, despite the new challenges, conditions and policies of our changing world.

Additionally, hierarchical organisations place greater expectation and focus on the leaders to find the answers. This limits the ability of the organisation to create new knowledge and ways of understanding. Public sector professionals have restricted autonomy to put into practice what they have learnt, due to the impositions placed upon then by both local and central government. However, staff are not passive, rather they are powerful players in the system and

Newman (2006)[9] and Yukl (2005)[10] argue that they have become very skilled at finding way of negotiating the discourses they experience. The organisations they work in, often fail to recognise the importance of the relational parts of the system in addressing these discourses. In other words there are many different realities at play in the system, which a hierarchical system fails to recognise. Leaders in children's services in very hierarchical organisations who want to implement innovative strategies such as coproduction, are therefore facing a significant challenge. They are working against the grain of their organisational culture. And they may not be fully aware of the power dynamics and networks in their services. However, the upside to this, is they are also likely to have a wealth of untapped resources in their staff.

So, given that radical transformational approaches are needed from a sector that has been traditionally hierarchical and focused on service improvement, what actions can be taken to achieve the shift required?

8    Parker R and Bradley L (2000) Organisational culture in the public sector: Evidence from six organisations, The International Journal of Public Sector Management, 13 (2), 125-141.

9    Newman, J ( 2005) Enter the Transformational Leader: Network Governance and the Micro Politics of modernization. Sage Publications.

10   Yukl, G. (2006) Leadership in Organisations 6th ed. Dorling Kindersley.

# What can organisational learning offer?

Organisational learning provides a useful lens to explore how organisations and the individuals within them can understand and change as the study of organisational learning is primarily concerned with how organisations learn. Whilst there are a number of approaches to the understanding of how organisations learn, two keys schools of thought have emerged. These are:-

Cognitive possession learning

Also known as technical learning. Learning is a product or outcome. It is external to the learner, concerned with learning as either a change in behaviour or a change in our mental state. The outcome is tangible knowledge. Whilst it recognises the importance of change as an outcome it does not recognise the changes that happen in people's experiences and ways of understanding the world. It intellectualises.

Chivas and Alegre (2005)

Figure 4.

Social perspective of learning.

People's experiences and ways of understanding the ways of the world are much more to do with the personal aspects of learning and are less overt and tangible. Learning is a process; it is organic, socially constructed and interactional. It is evolving and ongoing.

Argyris and Schon (1996)

Figure 5.

Public services have a bias towards cognitive possession learning, which is linked to the need to be doing or acting as opposed to reflecting and learning. The need to be holders of knowledge and provide answers is very powerful expectations on professionals due to both internal and external pressures. However, professionals are often working with incomplete information, complex emotions, people's values and belief systems, all of which challenge the notion of professionals as experts and brings into question how knowledge in organisations gets determined and who decides what gets heard and learnt. In other words... what gets known? There are four key ways of knowing:

- **Propositional** - knowing is about knowing something through ideas and theories and is expressed in abstract language and mathematics.

- **Experiential knowing** – through direct face to face encounters with persons, places and things. It is knowing through empathy and resonance and precedes any form of expression and communication

- **Practical knowing** - knowing how to do something and is expressed as a skill, knack or competence

- **Presentational knowing** - emerges from experimental knowing and provides its first expression through forms of imagery such poetry, story, drawing and so on. (Heron 1971 summarised by Reason 2001)[11]

Seely and Reason[12] suggest that propositional knowing dominates in public services. This means professionals run the risk of their intellect rushing in prematurely, with a show of certainty, planning and the provision of a quick answer to dispel any anxiety that might arise from dwelling on the complex and unknown. They argue that the problem with this, is that it misses out other dimensions and ways of knowing and ends up only dealing with what is on the surface and the professional's interpretation of that. Professionals are pushed to explain and give meaning, hence the shift to interpretation as opposed to exploration. Boud[13] believes there are some key propositions for learning. He believes that learning is informed by and stimulated by experience and that learners actively construct their experience through a holistic process. This is informed by socio-economic context and is socially and culturally constructed. Current ways of knowing are traditionally limited in public services and, consequently, limit the ways of understanding what is going on for both staff and users. In a similar manner, the political dimension of local government seeks surety, clarity and assurance to issues we simply do not have the answers to. This means leaders need to think very carefully about how to stimulate new forms of learning for councillors, staff and partners which will encourage greater reflection and allow new ideas to have traction and not be dismissed too quickly.

11  Reason (2001) Handbook of Practice Research Sage Publications.

12  Seely, C and Reason, P (2008) Ch 2 "Expression of Energy. An epistemology of presentational knowing" in Knowing differently. Arts based and collaborative research Nora Science Publishers.

13  Oud,D. Cohen,R. Walker D. (1993) "Using experience for learning" SRHE, Buckingham.

## Why is this relevant to children's services?

Children's Services have seen successive changes in child and family policy from central government, in the main prompted by the tragic death of a child. Each death has resulted in an inquiry, exposing the children's workforce to extreme public criticism, leading to new guidance and regulation. The enquiry into the death of Victoria Climbie, carried out by Lord Laming, held public sector workers accountable, seeing poor practice as the root cause. The result was an introduction of highly prescribed systems, processes and procedures. Many have been critical of such inquiries. Ruskin[14] for example argued that the inquiries were not about learning, but about blame. Cooper[15] argued that the inquiry did not take the opportunity to really understand the realities of doing complex child protection work and that the expression of policy in terms of performance, behaviour and professional competency failed to take account of the need for explanation, interpretation and understanding which is essential in understanding how the human being impacts on the systems they work within and vice versa. Pollitt[16] argued that the resulting prescribed framework undermined professional judgement and ran the risk of overshadowing the complex demands of the role and the reason individuals entered public service in the first place.

Peter Connelly's death in 2008 led to staff and organisations being exposed again to high levels of public criticism whilst trying their hardest to undertake challenging work. Under such circumstances, Argyris[17] suggests that staff resort to the typical behaviours associated with cognitive possession (intellectualising, being professional, and denying feeling). He suggests that in times of high levels of stress, complex problems, errors and their causes in the work process, cannot be properly identified or understood.

A complex range of drivers are at play. The motivators and behaviours of the individual workers, the culture of the organisation, the local and central government drivers, the power relationships, and emotional processes are all shaping and potentially inhibiting the ability to learn and change.

The Munro Report recommendations have moved significantly in understanding that child protection work is more than *"doing the relatively straightforward things well."* (Pollitt Op. cit). There is recognition that staff require on-going high levels of support and training and a culture of reflection and learning. However, the challenges remain; little regulation has been removed, staff are working in an environment of rising demand and reducing budgets and there remains a need to help staff think and behave differently in the way they go about their work. So what is the implication for leaders in children services who want to introduce innovation and change?

## What can leaders in children's services do?

This section of this think piece is far from exhaustive but is aimed at providing leaders in children's services with some key ideas to explore further and provides reference and signposting to other useful resources.

To change professionals thinking and behaviour requires a system change. Focusing on staff skill alone will not suffice. Other elements of the system require focus if the culture is to fundamentally change.

**Vision**- Sinclair[18] argues that visions in organisations can be stifling and that the only visions that achieve anything are those that resonate deeply within the group. Leaders will need to develop organisations that are able to promote reflective and critical engagement and provide opportunities for staff to agree and negotiate the vision together. This requires careful management to allow different realities to be explored and options to be developed. This "common sense-making" (Pye, 2005)[19] allows for issues to emerge , leads to greater ownership of the outcomes required and the processes needed to achieve them. Debating words in a vision often bring to the surface underlying discourses and understanding the meaning behind the differences allows a deeper dialogue to emerge, see Wright (2014)[20] on the complexities of the discourses in children's services.

14   Ruskin, M (2005) Conceptual analysis of critical moments in Victoria Climbe's life" Child and Family Social Work 10 pp 11-19 Blackwell Publishing.

15   Cooper A, Lousada, J. (2005) Borderline Welfare: Feeling and fear of feeling in modern welfare Karmac Books.

16   Pollitt, C (2007) New Labours re-disorganisation Public Management Review, 9:4 529 to 543

17   Argyris, ,C and Schon,D (1996) Organisational Learning 11 Theory, Method and practice reading. Massachusetts. Addison Wesley

18   Sinclair, A. (2007) Leadership for the Disillusioned Allen and Unwin.

19   Pye, A.J. (2005) "Leadership and organizing: sensemaking in action" School of Management. University of Bath.

20   Wright, A (2014) Making 'a fresh effort of thought to disrupt the discourse'. Virtual Staff College Think piece

**New insights** – an inclusive style of leadership requires leaders to understand the different elements at play within the system, including people's emotions and responses and user's insights . Leaders need to be open to different ways of generating knowledge. In order to find new and better solutions for the challenges, it will require seeking understanding from different perspectives. Different ways of gaining new insights can provide opportunities not only for better solutions to emerge but for improved ways of understanding the challenge in the first place. Typically, public services respond to a challenge by agreeing a course of action, developing a project plan and putting in place actions to achieve the agreed outcome. However, it is common that the challenge is misunderstood or it is only seen through one lens. Revisiting the challenge and understanding it from a different range of perspectives helps to reframe the challenge. For example, in the Parenting Supporting Parents case study described below, the professionals believed the challenge was that parents in areas of deprivation did not have an internal locus of control over their lives and were dependant on services, However, through the use of ethnographic interviews, it became clear that parents did have an internal locus of control but felt services did not meet their needs properly as they were professionally controlled and gave no option for families to truly engage. The solutions developed to the reframed challenge were therefore very different to the original challenge.

There are many mechanisms available to leaders in children services to help them draw inspiration from the perspectives of different groups. Frontline professionals, consumers, as well as practitioners and experts, all have different kinds of knowledge to bring to the understanding of an issue or problem. Using methods for insight generation helps to better understand the context of people's lives and the realities of people's behaviour. An example of this is ethnographic research, where people's lives are observed so that their habits and routines generate new insights. An example is available from the joint Nesta and Local Government Creative Council Programme where Derbyshire County Council used it to test it's ideas about how to raise aspiration amongst children in care. The VSC toolkit on ethnographic research provides guidance on how professionals can become involved in doing this, and this in itself is a powerful tool for cultural change.

**Generating new solutions-** As well as finding new insights on a challenge, the need for radical transformation in Local Government also demands the need for new solutions. Linus Pauling, the American chemist and only person to win the Nobel Peace Prize twice, stated that the best way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas and discard the bad ones. Leaders need to maximise the creativity of their stakeholders to generate the best ideas and solutions. Again there are a range of idea generation tools available such as competitions, challenge prizes, idea market places, brainstorms and so on. All are designed to stimulate imagination to create a longer menu of options for change from a range of stakeholders including users, partners and other professional groups.

**Staff skills and development -** Radically transforming public services solutions will require professionals to think and behave very differently. This kind of work requires a blurring of the distinction between professionals and users. This think piece has outlined why this is so challenging for professionals. It has also identified how changing the professional requires the system to be transformed (culture, the style of leadership, vision). However, as well as the individual workers requiring the environment to be conducive to achieving the outcomes, they require the skills and knowledge to enable them to think and behave differently. A professional development programme that exposes staff to new ways of engaging with users is essential. This requires the opportunity to test these skills by putting them into practice. They will need to develop new approaches to having conversations with users, which build on their capacities and a deeper understanding of their needs. This is not 'easy' work. It requires discipline, a belief that it is better to work this way and a determination not to revert to old practices. The gravitational pull back to traditional ways of working in local authorities is enormous and staff will require support to make these changes.

**Risk taking -** Children's services has experienced extreme public negative scrutiny and as identified earlier in this think piece, when under such pressure the typical response is to revert to tried and tested ways of working. New solutions will never be realised without a degree of testing, failing and testing again. Prototyping is key in the development of products. Dyson for example prototyped his first vacuum over 5000 times before it went to market. Public services need to create the environment where testing and trying out new solutions is OK. This requires a shift in the understanding of risk taking. As Thomas Eddison said *"Failing is one of the greatest arts in the world. One fails forward towards success"* (Fullan, M pg 22[21]). In order for staff to take risks they will be need the right authorising environment, one that encourages reasonable risk taking.

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21   Fullan, M. (2005) Leadership and Sustainability- Systems thinkers in action Cormin Press.

Monmouthshire County Council provides a good example of a Council who have embedded risk taking within their vision as a council, developing a *"Fail Fast Fail Forward"* prompt card that quickly allows staff to assess if they can develop, prototype and test their new ideas without have to seek managerial or leader approval. The toolkit in the VSC pack on prototyping services provides examples on how to undertake this work.

## A case study illustrating change in professional behaviour

Finally, Senior leaders in children's services can use the toolkit on changing professional behaviour to help them reflect on the culture in their services and decide whether they wish to embark on a programme of culture change selecting some of the tools provided to assist them in this endeavour. The key message of this set of resources is that engaging differently with communities both requires culture change, and also delivers it, if done well.

This final case study provides an illustration of this. The following case study *"Transforming Early Years"* was delivered by the Innovation Unit and funded by Nesta. It worked with six sites across the UK, applying a radical efficiency methodology, to develop early years solutions that offered better outcomes for families as well being radically different from existing provision but at a lower cost. 'Parents Supporting Parents' was developed as part of this programme by Reading Borough Council. It provides an example of a service developed by parents for parents. It involved working with families to define the challenge they wanted to address, designing and blueprinting the solution, prototyping the solution with families and finally launching the programme which is run by families for families.

Figure 6.

Parents Supporting Parents provides three levels of support to families, Meeter Greeter, Buddy and Mentor as identified in Figure 7, below. A screening tool designed with midwifery allows families in the geographical area to be identified as early as possible. This is followed up by a volunteer parent from the appropriate level of support making an introduction with the family. The type of support offered is then agreed between the volunteer and parent (and if necessary with support from a family worker). In prototyping the service, the volunteers identified that their motivations for volunteering were two fold. Firstly they wanted their community to be a safer place for all children to grow up and, secondly, they wanted the opportunity to undertake training, gain experience, develop a CV, and eventually be able to move onto work. Within 6 months of launching the service, the number of families being reached doubled and the service achieved a 30 percent saving. Two years on, 30 volunteers have received formal training and delivered over 1300 hours of support to other families. 17 of these volunteers have gone into paid employment and six new volunteers are currently being trained.

The model has now been adopted in another children's centre where they are currently training 19 volunteers.

During the development of this service, many staff found the transformation from one way of working to this new way very challenging. Through engaging in ethnographic work with families, the use of user insights, storytelling, and skills development, staff were able to change their thinking and practice. As one practitioner stated:

*"I am passionate about working with children and families. I thought I engaged families well but it was only when I did the ethnographic research with some families that I realised how often I let my professional opinion dominate… not really listening without judgement. It is hard to work this way but it is far more rewarding because you can see families grow and achieve more. To start with I really needed support to change the way we all worked but now it has become much easier."*

Figure 7.

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