

Some thoughts on the approach to change

Over the years I have been involved in various larger-scale programmes meant to change the ways that services get provided in a big and complex city. As part of the ongoing evaluation of one of these, the partnership I worked through was challenged to make more explicit its change-model. If it was bringing about system-wide change, how did it think it was doing it?

There seemed to be four interconnecting strands.

Although these applied at the whole-partnership level there may be value in looking at any use the 'tools' listed may have in other contexts (eg at the level of a single organisation; within a family, at the personal interactions level) changing the wording slightly to match each context.

1. Making use of factors influencing for change

There was an early recognition that the partnership was being established at a time of rapid change and that it would not be able to work in isolation. It would need to be highly alert to its environment. By its very nature it was driven by, and in turn added momentum to, the planning processes within the several major service provider agencies in the city each of which had its own set of agendas and priorities outside of coming together as partners to focus on one specific set of developments. The partnership arrangements were established at a time of rapid national policy change and was expected to forge a way forward through the national changes that would have impacts across the area. The partners, collectively, needed to be rapidly responsive to (and able to feed back into) shifting national and local developments.

There was a shift to be made in the way that the partner agencies worked. All of them were 'traditional' formal, managerial organisations used to fixed annual planning cycles, with budgets allocated annually against predetermined headings. Responding in more agile ways as contexts changed around them would imply a different way of doing things that might not sit easily with their established routines.

Tools used:

- Turning any national and local reviews, reports and evaluations into a checklist of action points re changes to be made within partner agencies' own activities
- Regularly scanning horizons for changes and updating (e.g. checking internet 'latest'; ensuring local receipt of key documents; securing appropriate involvement in national and local key groups)
- Reading the 'waves'; knowing what is coming re changes in local and national arrangements and strategies; interpreting wider trends for the local context, allowing partners to be in the right place when waves of change swept across the area.
- Keeping some capacity for rapid reaction and repositionings of resources; not tying everything up so tightly that agility became impossible
- Covering changed emphases through short term flexible team attachments; having a strong centrally-directed 'project development' approach

- Close financial monitoring and continuous redeployment of resources to best effect
- Setting times for outcome/vision focusing, 'Where was it we were supposed to be getting to?'; identifying 'distance still to be travelled'
- Target setting, not as tick-box items that might get 'artificially' met but as aspirations to be collectively achieved in terms of real changes to services or improvements in outcomes for groups of people; having an approach to action planning that was flexible and adaptable as the year went on

2. Managing change

The reasons the various agencies had agreed to work in partnership was partly driven by the availability of some shared resources (although previous models had seen one agency simply holding all the money and asking the others to join them in a required list of partners but not playing any active role after that), but mostly because of a shared commitment early on that things in the city needed to be changed and that this could only be done in collaboration, if real structural progress was to be made over the long term. There was a moral dimension as well as a pragmatic one.

Some necessary early principles were worked on:

- The need to reiterate a common, consistent, transparent purpose; keeping to the same overall aim of changing the ways that mainstream services operate
- Consistent leadership: pushing for change whilst appreciating the constraints that different agencies were working with
- Repeated messages: establishing a culture of change that all could agree with
- Strategic objectives: identifying a small number of key levers of change and using these as a framework for agreeing development activities year on year
- Steerage: actively engaging particular senior managers from partners, those with the power to immediately change things within their own organisation
- Flexible development team, not seconded to the partnership but continuing to work within their home organisation, but able to be brought together as necessary to focus on specific common issues: people with the ability to directly operationalise change back on the ground
- Retaining sufficient/adequate resources to be able to respond when opportunities arise to push changes through ; includes keeping any central infrastructure/expenditure as small as possible so resources aren't spent on internal processes
- Ensuring reputation is built up through practice rather than through promotions (More of a 'Get down to work' focus than over-concern with high profile launches/publicity)
- Recognising the respective roles both of partners and of the partnership ways of working; working in ways to avoid the development of 'boundary wars' between partners by stressing the common cause

Tools used:

- Early agreement of key principles and systems

- Use of key intermediaries from partners, loosely attached as a network of knowledgeable practitioners/developers able to focus on partnership's objectives from within the day-to-day work of their own organisation
- Annual business planning, in shifting context – identifies the agreed progress to be made each year
- Appraisal of development proposals by someone other than the organisation responsible for delivery
- Partnership represented within key steering groups; planning groups – able to influence things at their early stages of developments
- Communications promote the work of partners (as much as promoting the partnership) keeping a focus on broad developments
- Partnership level reviews undertaken of various aspects re strategic objectives. Partnership mechanisms reviewed annually
- Early 'system compliance' work done to ensure that partners aren't distracted by having to constantly do later remedial work

3. Leverage on Partners

The partnership was set up to operate through its partners rather than take on a high-profile role for itself. This was quite different from previous partnership arrangements which had spent energy and resources on having their own building, their own dedicated large team of staff, their own separate structures, and a clear identity that others were expected to subscribe to etc. The partnership referred to here was to remain in the background, to be more of a way of operating rather than a visible structure, yet have powerful leverage on the plans and actions of the varied partners. This required some mechanisms for influencing partner organisations at a number of levels. This would entail leverage on the content of organisational plans; but would also mean exerting some leverage on the style of planning: taking organisations away from fixed annual planning, action charts etc towards looser, more flexible, more uncertain ways of aiming to bring about widespread changes to mainstream Activities.

Through a 3 level matrix of influence with partners ('strategy' level; 'management' level and 'doing' level), the partnership was able to impact on:

- Staffing capacity for change within partners
- Leadership for change within partners
- Culture/language of change within partners
- Inter-relationships between partners
- Quality of planning within partners
- Effectiveness of operational mechanisms within partners
- Use of partners' own resources for development
- Quality standards in partners' own provider networks
- Establishing and maintaining the reputation of partners i.e. partners' capacity to implement change

Tools used:

- Annual agreements between partners re the 'next steps' changes and each agency's contribution to these developments (and how feasible and cost effective these were)
- Quarterly monitoring of progress to keep momentum going; to identify any potential underspend for reallocation
- Tracking back to identify the remaining 'gap to outcome' – stress 'getting there' re strategic objectives
- Working back from target outcomes – focus on numbers still to be worked with in order to get 'whole system' progress; no falling back on small-scale projects when things get difficult
- 'At the right time' conversations across sets of people who are the best ones to focus on a specific issue, taking a task-and-finish approach. Few regularly scheduled meetings other than the minimum number needed for good governance.
- Reviews at level of broad developments, each covering a range of developments within different agencies
- 'Whole system' querying rather than worrying about small activity detail
- Central structures kept small, and things done right, so that energies can go on 'futures thinking'

4. Key phrases are used to establish working culture

Most of the agencies' core role was to ensure the effective delivery of their own programmes (at certain quality standards) for target client groups. 'Changing the system' needed a different way of thinking, and work needed to be done via the Partnership re 'thinking for change'. This required a 'language for change' – in the sense of a set of frequently repeated phrases used between partners to establish a culture:

- being well positioned in shifting landscapes
- keeping stable relationships with each partner, even where relationships between partners are not strong
- the basic operating rules are well known, and complied with
- promoting change as 'opportunity' as well as 'necessity'
- communicating a compelling purpose for change – keeping an eye on 'what's it all for?'
- inspiring trust, through behaviours ... 'this is the way we do things, isn't it...'
- adequate resources, deployed in agreed framework; ensuring that 'money' doesn't become the main discussion. Money (once adequate) is not as important as having properly planned ways forward

Tools used:

- Rehearsing the track record of changes brought about – consolidating the success of 'how far we have come together'
- Repeated emphasis on work through the partners– it's not about the partnership as a separate entity
- Emphasis on getting there – descriptions of 'how will we know when we've got there?'; 'distance still to go' – in terms of desired outcomes

for groups of people (even if the exact direction and speed of travel remained relatively uncertain).

- Strategies clear yet flexible to use in context – kept to consistently repeated strategic objectives/purposes – not bogged down in fine detail of activity
- ‘Bigger picture’ regularly rehearsed – ‘what was it we were supposed to be doing? How does it all fit together?’
- Support collaboration across agencies; language is that of ‘joint collaborative ...’ etc – dampening down ‘fragmented, competitive...’ etc
- Right mix of leadership and management; linkage between bigger ‘directional’ statements and day to day ‘operational’ statements. Not all vague intents.
- Keeping ‘progress’ the topic of discussions/meetings/plans/reports rather than letting agendas become dominated by a focus only on the money.
- Critical friend role – challenge and support; stressing partnership not as an organisation, or as a funding mechanisms – but as a function that supports organisations re change, but also pushes them to do that bit more.