

To create leaner, more effective organisations, argues **Christian Bason**, civil servants must understand and empathise with service users

Christian Bason, director, MindLab

Across most western economies, and not least in Great Britain, policymakers are searching desperately for the kinds of radical new solutions and approaches that can deliver better services and outcomes for a lot less money

There is plenty of evidence that it is in fact possible – across a variety of public services – to have your cake and eat it too. In a recent report on ‘radical efficiency’, sponsored by Nesta, the Innovation Unit, a social enterprise which supports public sector innovation, identified a range of examples of service delivery in diverse policy fields that yielded savings of 20-60 per cent while improving outcomes. One of the key findings of that report – which is parallel to what we are seeing in Denmark – is that it is by fundamentally changing the relationship between citizens and government agencies that new value can be unleashed.

For most public managers, however, this leaves a few questions. What is the systematic process that might give us the kind of profound insights that could help us bring about these kinds of fundamental change? How do we address our challenges not by hoping for random one-off sparks of creativity, but as a strategic effort to shape a different kind of government? How do we become serial innovators?

Inside the Danish government, we are finding that the answer is pretty simple: gaining insight into people’s actual lives, and involving citizens directly in policy and service development, is the key to seeing and testing how the government/citizen relationship can be transformed.

At MindLab – an innovation unit run jointly by the three departments of economic and business affairs, taxation and employment – we are using ethnographic research and design-driven collaborative workshops to help public servants address their most important challenges. Through these projects, public servants are systematically gaining insight into the concrete lives of people and businesses, triggering real eye-openers and helping them address issues such as:

- *What is valuable?* Civil servants must develop a better understanding of which elements of current or future public interventions are valuable to citizens in terms of service and outcomes, identify the key resources and drivers that may impact behaviour change, and pinpoint the relevant contribution(s) of government.

- *Can less be more?* Better insight into what might not be at all valuable to citizens can inform decisions to terminate existing services, or avoid creating new ones that would have negligible benefit.

- *How do we create synergy?* Decision-makers must better understand how the regulations, programmes and interventions for which they are responsible fit into the context of people’s lives, and how they relate to the host of other interactions they have with other public organisations, businesses, family, communities and so on. This can enable the creation of much smarter, cheaper ‘holistic’ interventions at systems level, where the interplay between public bodies and other actors is



Christian Bason: advocate of ‘co-production’ and ‘co-creation’ of public services

truly experienced as ‘joined-up’ from the perspective of citizens or businesses.

- *Where is co-production possible?*

Deeper citizen involvement can help identify where and how citizens, communities or other actors have the resources, motivation and skills to undertake part of the job that government is currently carrying out, or wishes to be carried out.

Interestingly, it is striking how easy it can be, through the very act of involvement, to generate increasing democratic participation or legitimacy. Better citizen engagement is about finding better solutions to achieve politically defined visions of the future. Even though citizens may often be very motivated to contribute their time and expertise, and indeed find that their participation is personally meaningful and empowering, that is not the main point. The point is that public sector organisations need citizens’ participation to better understand what service users experience, how their experience could be improved, and their behaviour might be changed.

Managers and staff of government departments and agencies are hardly representative of the population. But they may very well forget that. As a manager in a UK central government agency said to a group of visiting policymakers from Denmark: “If you ask our colleagues here who they think about when they develop a new service, the answer would be: ‘A white male in his mid-40s, with a higher education, living in London.’”

Civil servants are rarely themselves users of the services they supply or regulate. Few social policymakers have tried being an alcoholic, or homeless or having a handicapped child. Not many officials who regulate or service private businesses have ever run an enterprise.

At a presentation I gave to a group of health professionals in management positions, many of them said they ‘knew what it was like’ to be a patient because they had been ill and used the hospital. I then asked how many of them had tried to be a Somali immigrant female patient with no Danish language skills? The group, consisting only of ethnic Danish people, fell silent. ■

Bason is author of *Leading public sector innovation: co-creating for a better society*

There’s no substitute for preparation

The members of select committees need more support

Like a fresh intake of school first-years (year sevens, for our readers in the education department), the new batch of MPs will take a while to learn the ropes. This is not easy: there’s no job manual – not even a Commons map – and the whips are more like prefects (or, sometimes, bullies) than teachers.

So MP freshers must be forgiven a little naivety – even when they’re sitting on select committees. But recently even some of the new chairs have been showing signs of not doing their homework. Facing the huge resources of government, select committees are already at a massive disadvantage in their task of holding it to account; if they’re further weakened by a shaky understanding of Whitehall’s operations, processes and institutions, they have little chance of punching above their weight.

At cabinet secretary Gus O’Donnell’s appearance before the public administration select committee last week, chair Bernard Jenkin confessed that he was “a little confused” over O’Donnell’s role, asking whether “you are a sort of non-executive chairman of the civil service, rather than being the managing director”. O’Donnell had to inform Jenkin that the service “is not one employer” – a crucial fact when considering public administration. Later, Jenkin revealed that he knows almost nothing of his party colleague Francis Maude’s work on reducing IT spending or improving procurement.

The MP Nick De Bois, meanwhile, argued that Gus’s advice during the coalition negotiations on the market risks of uncertainty was a “political statement” – something that, with a wide enough definition, could be said of almost all expert advice provided to ministers by civil servants. Given this level of understanding of how government works, it’s hard to see how the committee could produce new insights into how it should be improved.

A paucity of research is not confined to PASC. Yesterday, political and constitutional reform committee chair Graham Allen – who will quiz O’Donnell on the Cabinet Manual tomorrow – told CSW that it is “a secret document which no elected authority has been able to peruse” (it was news to him that chapter 6 of the draft manual went online in February). And the Public Accounts Committee – still deprived of independent research support – can do little more than ask people’s opinions of NAO reports.

These examples of poor subject knowledge and research reflect politicians’ priorities and lack of time, as well as the inadequate support for select committees. (They also don’t auger well for the environmental audit committee’s ability to take over the scrutiny role of the Sustainable Development Commission.) But this is really basic stuff. Had MPs read the Operational Efficiency Programme and CSW (which they receive fortnightly), and put a couple of queries to the Cabinet Office, their initial questions would have been answered. Then they could have put some more testing and appropriate ones to Gus – and in so doing, improved our understanding of the very real challenges facing government. ■

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Making redundancies, warns **Suzanne Hall**, can damage employers as much as the unlucky staff made redundant



The focus for most public sector employers is on reducing budgets, costs and headcounts. But if they’re to avoid adding costs and inefficiency down the road, civil servants must also maximise staff engagement and retention.

During the last recession many companies were hit by ‘survivor syndrome’: the impact of redundancies on those staff who have *not* lost their jobs. This impact can limit the potential financial savings of redundancies, by reducing the performance and attendance of remaining employees, and by increasing staff turnover.

Previous research has shown that the effects on ‘survivors’ of redundancy programmes include lower morale, reduced motivation, higher rates of stress-related illness, and retention problems. And while meaningful communications with employees can limit ‘survivor syndrome’, this is a challenge during redundancy programmes.

Departments should consult with staff on redundancies’ implications; give them practical support; involve them in change programmes; and undertake employee engagement exercises. Face-to-face communications are best – staff and line manager meetings – and managers should take care to be honest and encourage openness. Gather data on staff opinions, and support weaker managers – with mentoring, for example.

The key to survival is twofold. First, handle redundancy programmes well, so departing staff remain champions of the organisation and feel fairly treated. Second, recognise that ‘survivors’ reactions to redundancy may harbour a longer-term impact, and take the steps required to re-engage staff – no matter how fast the rush to press ahead with cuts. ■

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