



www.versa.uk.com

Designing high performance public service organisations

Paul Essery

Director - Versa Professional Services Limited

M: 0771 782 3377

E: paul.essery@versa.uk.com

Redesigning public service organisations

It is stating the obvious to point out that public service organisations need to be designed to maximise the productivity of the professionals that work in them.

However, it is also obvious that current organisational designs often don't take in to account what is required to manage today's knowledge workers effectively and are simply not capable of delivering the improvements in service that are now required.

What is needed is a more integrated approach to organisational design that responds better to change and that enables managers to unlock the potential of public sector employees to respond more effectively to customer requirements.

The starting point of this is for leaders and senior managers to better understand organisational purpose. The very idea of 'fitness for purpose' is predicated on a clear understanding of the outcomes that are required and on which the organisations effort and energy need to be focused.

Public services under pressure

As we enter the early part of the 21st century it is clear that public service organisations are under more pressure than ever to deliver raised levels of service. It is unlikely that this pressure will ease in the foreseeable future:

- All the major political parties are committed, in one way or another, to reforming public services.
- The pace of change is rapid with both politicians and the public wanting to see both quick and sustainable improvement.
- Service users have rising expectations of the quality and flexibility of the service that they can access.
- The resources going into public services are at record levels and the pressure for efficiency and innovation is therefore increasing.
- The role of the private sector in the delivery of public services is expanding and there is an increasing need for collaborative working.

The challenge for managers in this pressurised environment then is to maintain and enhance the delivery of efficient and effective public services whilst innovating and adapting. The best way to do this is to focus on enhancing and promoting the productivity and creativity of the people that actually have to provide those services.

Ineffective approaches to organisational design need to be unpicked and new ways need to be developed that put the productivity and creativity of knowledge workers at the heart of how public services are organised and delivered.

Poor organisational design

Many public service organisations continue to be overly hierarchical and rigid, making them both costly to run and slow in responding to the changing needs end users.

As a result many public service organisations can now no longer be considered 'fit for purpose' in an operating environment where speed and complexity demand sharp increases in responsiveness and flexibility.

High level changes to governance, like the creation of non departmental government bodies and executive agencies have helped to give managers some space to innovate. This has had a positive impact in many instances, but deep rooted problems often still persist in the design of many public service organisations.

The types of design faults that continue to be widespread across the public sector include:

- Inefficient 'command and control' approaches that require 'going up' before 'going across' the organisation making collaboration difficult as well as wasting valuable time and energy.
- Poorly understood needs of knowledge workers lead to many people being under-utilised and de-skilled. Job design often focuses on narrow operational tasks and fails to recognise the wider context in which those tasks need to be carried out.
- The use of cumbersome management approaches such as 'matrix management' where the competing views of 'multiple bosses' often lead to unnecessary complexity and unhelpful tensions.
- Process management, particularly across organisational boundaries, is made difficult because people continue to work in isolated 'silos' with narrowly focused roles and with little ownership of service delivery as a whole.
- Services are often run more on the basis of staff convenience rather than being specifically designed to meet the needs of customers or service users that they are supposed to be providing for.

The result of these unhelpful practices is that work in public service organisations can often be unnecessarily complex and frustratingly inefficient. Operations can often be slow and inflexible, services are poorly designed and the needs of consumers are poorly understood.

In these situations people, unsurprisingly, become preoccupied with responding to management demands rather than satisfying service users. De-motivated staff and poor customer service is usually the end result.

Towards a new approach

What is required for the future is an integrated approach to organisational design that enhances collaboration, focuses on outcomes and rewards the collective effectiveness of those involved. The evidence that we have looked at suggests that there are a number of practical 'design principles' that have been shown to work and can be applied in many public service organisations. Key strategies to consider include:

- ✓ ***Understand the needs of the end user*** - services need to be designed with the needs of the consumer in mind. Service standards need to be clear and poor customer service needs to be identified and addressed.
- ✓ ***Use Lean and Agile operating techniques*** - design and deliver services in ways that minimise waste and maximise efficiency in meeting consumer needs and aspirations.
- ✓ ***Simplify reporting arrangements*** - establishing clear lines of accountability and clarifying decision making arrangements helps to reduce confusion, unnecessary re-work and the development of a 'blame culture'.
- ✓ ***Keep the organisation flat*** - wide spans of control help to keep staffing costs down, discourage 'micro management' and enhance opportunities for people to use their initiative.
- ✓ ***Share support services*** - bringing together common 'back office' functions like HR or Finance into a single 'shared service operation' is an opportunity to both reduce costs and improve service quality.
- ✓ ***Focus on managing performance*** - evaluating and promoting people on the basis of measurable results and freeing people to 'get on with the job' helps to encourage a 'can do' culture across the organisation.
- ✓ ***Build professional capacity*** - provide coaching support and encourage staff to establish professional networks to support 'cross boundary' collaboration and knowledge transfer.
- ✓ ***Appoint 'process owners'*** - operational processes requiring cross organisational working can be improved by appointing people with responsibility for 'end to end' service delivery.
- ✓ ***Actively manage talent*** - to ensure that the organisation has put in place the right people, who are doing the right jobs, in the right way and focused on delivering the right priorities.

Public service organisations need to develop tailored responses to the specific challenges and constraints that confront them by maximising the productivity of knowledge workers and understanding the needs of end users. These will be critical factors in driving the long term transformation of public services and in delivering improved outcomes for service users.