

PARADIGMS

Warning: Once you have read this article, you may not be any wiser.

Continuous improvement

I began my working life as a scientist, for which I am ever thankful. Studying science gave a lifelong interest which grew by leaps and bounds as insights and discoveries about the world around us, and ourselves, became ever more amazing.

Many things I learned at Uni have been overthrown, reconfigured or completely solved by now – not because the science wasn't good in the first place, far from it – this happened because the scientific method is relentless, everything is questioned, tested and peer reviewed, and the misapprehensions and incorrect assumptions are eventually found out.

Scientific method is the ultimate in continuous improvement, and good continuous improvement should demonstrate elements of scientific method.

Perspectives

Science, as with other disciplines, offers a set of concepts and a body of knowledge that influences how I understand the world around and interpret why humanity behaves as it does.

But after some years in government and community service circles, I have to admit that there are very few scientific thinkers in Local Government. There isn't much room for it. More often than not, science and politics come together only when it is convenient for one or the other.

The Local Government experience highlights how divergent people's perspectives can be. For instance, drawing on an earlier article, we each have a deep understanding of our own realms of expertise, but little of others'.

The suggestion was that perhaps social workers should understand some engineering, financial managers should know something about community



development, and that all council workers could do well to understand engagement, consultation and human psychology. That is what I would call a good grounding for Local Government professionalism'.

In contrast, our talk of Local Government competencies is usually about the political and regulatory turf.

Policy and proof

The scientific method has a difficult path (if a path at all) to pursue in Local Government, or any government really.

As Local Government professionals, our job is to implement and operationalise policies. Obviously, this has nothing to do with testing held views and assumptions, nor investigating contrary evidence. Once there is a policy, the policy is pretty well truth, and our job is to support it.

We are here to prove and rationalise, not do what science tries to do, which is disprove and debunk.

The Local Government professional has the role of believer, implementer and

reporter of how the policy is going, and as tacticians getting around or through impediments to applying the policy.

Only at some later stage, perhaps after an election, political processes may amend or even turn a policy on its head. While such changes are informed or influenced by senior public servants, the rest of us simply need to move with the times, or if it's too unpalatable, just move on.

No iconoclasts please

We are not employed to be contrary, regardless of how much talk there is about innovation and testing assumptions. Quite frankly, what we call innovation is more like incremental change. The word sounds proactive and creative though.

The assumptions and supportive evidence in policies and plans are not there to be challenged – their purpose is to guide and keep us on the straight and narrow.

In any case, much of the data and references we use to make our strategies

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and plans ‘evidence based’ are produced by like minded people or from the tier of government above us.

And we know what logic loops like this do – they reinforce what has come before.

Pollination across professions

Scientific method is very good at confirming the repeatability of experimentally derived evidence or a hypothesis, and it especially aims to ensure that one line of expertise can cast light on another.

No more so than in this day and age is the cross pollination of knowledge and perspectives both possible and necessary. Our understanding of the world and humanity is only limited by the number of concepts you can keep in your head at any time.

Thus, the collaborative approach, where we recognise that many heads are better than one or two, is a good one.

In Local Government, we use this to develop strategies and manage projects, but I don’t think we use them to debunk or innovate much.

Partnering knowledge

There’s no better place for professional collaboration than in Local Government.

The breadth of responsibilities and the complexity of our subject matter (the



community and other governments) ought to require collaboration as the number one method for understanding our actions.

And indeed we try with internal reference groups, working parties, management teams and inter-council forums. Such constructs are good at political and process management, but they are hardly set up to test assumptions or gain new and innovative insights.

In principle, these collaborative structures could create “ah ha!” moments for the enquiring Local Government professional, offering a completely refreshed way of applying skills and knowledge. Let’s replace departmental team meetings with interdepartmental portfolio meetings I say.

Paradigms

If multidisciplinary collaboration won’t uncover truths and novel approaches, perhaps what you need is a whole paradigm shift in the organisation - a completely new perspective on one’s purpose or modus operandi.

A popular vehicle for this is to focus workplace culture on customer service – the line that we are not just plying our professions, but more importantly, we are serving a community of customers with certain expectations that we must meet. By all accounts, most councils have gone down this track to differing degrees of workplace intensity.

A more recent example comes from an inner city council where the bulk of employees were given project management training. Not revolutionary, but it got many to view their jobs differently.

Let’s see where they land

An extreme method of changing workplace mindsets is the organisational restructure, and I don’t mean a little

tinkering – I mean a new organisational chart, a few new faces, out with a few others, a new set of responsibilities for managers and team leaders, and new teams and relationships for the rest of us.

Having gone through two or three restructures of this magnitude, my view is that they can be wonderfully refreshing and liberating, they do create new horizons and often lead to genuine shifts in purpose and perspective – paradigm shifts. For a short time, albeit within constraints, the organisation reflects the free form nature of our communities as people get accustomed to where they’ve landed.

I would suggest that a major restructure every two to four years can be like a shot of highly potent growth hormone for council organisations.

Work in progress

Thanks to you the reader who has read this far.

I have successfully meandered through describing scientific method, making blunt remarks about policies, questioning our capacity to innovate, discussing collaboration between disciplines, musing on workforce paradigm shifts, and finally suggesting we chuck the baby out with the bathwater when implementing organisational restructures.

For once, I don’t have a conclusion to leave you with, probably due to having too many perspectives. So I guess this is a work in progress.

Would anyone like to nudge my paradigm?

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1 Bunch of Professions, PROfile December 2008.