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Pragmatism and Caffeine: lessons from cross-agency, cross-sector working

The ways forward for addressing complex policy problems have been well documented and concepts like network leadership, collaboration and citizen engagement espoused. In reality, for those working in cross-agency, cross-sector teams, the way forward is messy, frustrating, and simultaneously exciting. This article shares the practical experience of a cross-agency, cross-sector project team in the

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hope that thinking is invested not only in the virtues of new ways of working, but in how to operationalise them.

'Wicked' policy problems

Gill et al. (2010) predict that New Zealand public policy development over the coming decades will need to address more complex problems, for a more diverse and differentiated population, in a context of constrained resources and faster, less predictable change. Increasingly, policy problems will go beyond the capacity of any one organisation to understand or respond to.

Gill and his team characterise such problems by adopting Kurtz and Snowden's model (Kurtz and Snowden, 2003). Problems can be thought of as:

- complex, that is, cause and effect become clear only in retrospect and the pattern is not repeated;
- chaotic, that is, no cause and effect relationships can be identified;
- knowable, that is, cause and effect are separated over time and space;
- known, that is, cause and effect relations are repeatable, perceivable and predictable (as cited in Gill et al., 2010).

Complex and chaotic problems have also earned the label ‘wicked’ and have an identifiable set of characteristics, as outlined by the Australian Public Service Commission:

- the policy problem will be defined in a number of different ways – all appropriate – depending on the lead agency or stakeholder and the lens they apply to it;
- within the problem, there will be conflicting and competing objectives, interdependencies, and multiple causes; stakeholders and agencies will place different emphasis on different aspects of the problem;
- addressing wicked problems can lead to unforeseen consequences elsewhere;
- wicked problems evolve, so those addressing them will also need to evolve their approach;
- there is no clear, or technical solution; the problems are not ‘fixed’ but ‘managed’;
- wicked problems are characterised by social complexity, that is, solutions will need to involve coordinated action by a range of stakeholders, including government, non-government agencies, private businesses and the public;
- such problems will not sit neatly with one organisation, but rather a group;
- wicked problems often involve the need for changed behaviour. (Australian Public Service Commission, 2007)

Improving outcomes for vulnerable children: a ‘wicked problem’

Improving outcomes for vulnerable children involves a complex array of competing agendas; legislative obligations; the behaviours of parents, families and whānau, professionals and government officials; funding rules; and many different interventions that address specific areas of children’s vulnerability.

Consider a five-year-old child with signs of developmental delay and exhibiting behaviour problems who starts attending the local primary school. This is a momentous step for this child and its family. However, the child will require specific supports to ensure he/she engages in lifelong learning, and

develops and learns to socialise with other children of the same age. While the child comes from a good family, the father has recently lost his job at the local meat works and the family are now reliant on the part-time cleaning work by the mother at local motels. They live in a small rural community and new job prospects are slim. The increased stress of living with less money has been made harder by the arrival of a younger sibling two years ago and the ongoing post-natal depression experienced by the mother after this second birth. There were also no appropriate local services available within suitable travelling time for her to go to to get support.

There are no care and protection needs for this family, but the complexity of the individual, family and community risk

factors in this situation means the child, without appropriate and timely supports, is vulnerable to poor life outcomes.

There is not one complete ‘fix’ or agency response which would enable this child and family to flourish. However, government agencies and NGO providers are restricted as to what they can do by the funding, contractual and legislative rules placed on their services. The needs of the child, parents and siblings are dealt with separately, addressing parts that each individual agency can ‘fix’.

Working on ‘wicked problems’

The consensus in the literature, drawn from New Zealand, across the ditch and further afield, is that ‘traditional’ policy processes that involve a group of officials working through a linear process – defining the problem, gathering data, generating options and consulting with

stakeholders – will not address ‘wicked problems’ such as improving outcomes for vulnerable children and their families and whānau (Australian Public Service Commission, 2007; Dovey, 2003; Eppel et al., 2011). Instead, collaborative strategies working across boundaries within government and beyond government are seen as effective for generating sustainable solutions and change (State Services Commission, 2008; Managing for Shared Outcomes Development Group, 2004).

Collaboration could include adopting a model of policy clusters and building horizontal connectedness, as proposed by the Committee Appointed by the Government to Review Expenditure on Policy Advice (2010); or delegating authority for problem solving to a selected group (such as a group of

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stakeholders or experts) (Australian Public Service Commission, 2007). This mechanism has been adopted here through the use of taskforces and advisory groups (Committee Appointed by the Government to Review Expenditure on Policy Advice, 2010).

A cross-agency, cross-sector process: the Green Paper for Vulnerable Children project

While many improvements have been made to agency collaboration, still many New Zealand children do not get the best start to their lives. This is despite the commitment of thousands of professionals who work tirelessly with vulnerable children and their families and whānau. With this in mind, in April 2011 Cabinet announced that a green paper for vulnerable children would be prepared by a cross-agency, multi-disciplinary team, and the appointment

of an independent person to lead it. It also sought the establishment of two expert advisory groups which would oversee the preparation of the paper – a group drawn from academia, and a ‘frontline forum’ drawn largely from non-government agencies and practitioners. A team drawn from the social sector agencies was assembled in May 2011 to develop the paper in conjunction with the advisory groups. The authors of this article were all members of this team.

The first task of the Green Paper cross-agency team was to conceptualise and define ‘vulnerability’. New Zealand longitudinal studies and international research point clearly to the difficulty

The team then went on to review relevant evidence and research across the social sector, interviewed key people, and undertook the associated analysis and drafting of the Green Paper. It was launched on 27 July 2011 and public consultation will continue through to February 2012.

This example illustrates the value of cross-agency working. A richer and integrated ‘problem definition’ was created, based on outcomes for children, that may not have been possible if one agency was positioned as ‘lead’ and tasked with defining vulnerability through their particular ‘lens’. The definition developed provides the basis for an ongoing cross-

solutions need to be found.

The team identified four lessons it would highlight:

1. *Cross-agency team members need permission to address the wicked problem at hand*

Given the multi-causal nature of wicked problems, defining the issue and finding ways of moving forward involves looking at the issue from different angles. Team members from different agencies needed to bring their agency lens and perspective, but also be given permission by their agency to work collaboratively to find suitable solutions to the problem.

No single agency perspective will be sufficient to address a wicked problem; indeed, if a single agency perspective could address the problem there is no need for a cross-agency team. It will be the combination of cross-agency knowledge and perspective, and the debate and refining that occurs in a cross-agency team, that will produce a more suitable solution. Agency positions may need to be compromised and new solutions beyond single agency positions created. Cross-agency team members live in a ‘grey’ world in which they bring their agency perspective but will be accountable for a product that, in the end, may not represent their agency’s view. Unless team members are given permission to move away from their agency positions, cross-agency teams are unlikely to be productive.

While this makes sense, it can be difficult to put into place. Policy processes in the past may have been based on more ‘adversarial’ models, where a lead agency defines the problem, undertakes the analysis and then works to bring others on board. Moving to a process where no one perspective is dominant requires thoughtfulness, and the structures and processes within contributing agencies to enable it to happen.

The Green Paper team were clear about their mandate: working collectively to identify potential solutions and the pros and cons of such solutions, for public discussion, to improve outcomes for vulnerable children, and then bringing their agency perspective and knowledge to bear on this.

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in doing this. Vulnerability often results from a combination of factors affecting an individual child and their environment – such as their genetics, parents, families and whānau, neighbourhood and access to services (Fergusson et al., 2004). Each social sector agency has a different ‘lens’ and conceptualisation of the vulnerable children they work with. A public health view of vulnerability could, for example, prioritise a different set of factors to define and describe vulnerability than would an educational achievement lens or a care and protection frame. However, it is likely that the agencies are working with some of the same children and their families and whānau.

Working together, the cross-agency team defined vulnerability from the perspective of a child – rather than from their individual sector perspectives – and identified, based on evidence, what are the key aspects of vulnerability facing New Zealand children. These key aspects range across the areas of responsibility of the social sector agencies.

sector approach to vulnerability and a platform for future joint policy work and integrated service delivery. The use of a dedicated team of officials with an independent leader informed by two reference groups is a new model for policy development. It is an interesting test case for working on ‘wicked problems’, as it adopts both a collaborative cross-agency and an ‘expert’ cross-sector model.

At the end of the project, the team completed a project debrief and sought feedback from the frontline forum and two members of the expert reference group. While some of the experiences of the team were specific to the personalities and context, the team identified a number of generic lessons that are shared here.

Lessons from the Green Paper team

As in most things, the Green Paper team concluded, it is how the team operates and the processes around it that will dictate how successful it will be and where behavioural, process and structural barriers come into play and pragmatic

2. *Cross-agency team working is not for everyone*

The Green Paper team identified a number of key competencies and attributes members of a cross-agency team will need in order to make a useful contribution to the team:

- *Focused on problem solving.* By their very nature, cross-agency teams are working collaboratively to solve or manage problems. Team members need to be flexible, creative and focused on solutions.
- *Resilient.* Working across agencies and with academics and non-government organisations means any work produced will be critiqued by many stakeholders, and from multiple perspectives. Being open to constant scrutiny and continual revising and re-working as the process unfolds means team members must be resilient and adaptable.
- *Effective written and verbal communicators.* Team members will need to be able to bring their agency perspective and knowledge to the cross-agency table and express it in a way that others with different backgrounds can understand. Similarly, once a decision has been made within a cross-agency team, team members will need to be able to translate this decision in a way that their agency will understand and connect with. Well-developed analytical and written and oral communication skills are essential.
- *Comfortable working in ambiguity.* Working on wicked problems with many stakeholders means the working environment will be fluid and dynamic. Team members will also be working in a 'grey' space, slightly apart from their agency, where clear specification of relationships and accountability may not be possible. The ability to 'get on with the job', and manage relationships and issues as they evolve, are crucial.
- *Comfortable working in a team environment.* The very nature of collective problem solving means there will be face-to-face meetings, debate and the necessary sharing of ideas and perspectives. For those who do

not enjoy such an environment, cross-agency teams will be a nightmare.

How the cross-agency team is led also matters. Cross-agency team members may not know each other and need to be melded into a trusting, coherent team quickly. Team leaders need to be able to quickly understand the preferences, strengths and weaknesses of their team members and create a positive and trusting team environment quickly, and this is perhaps more important in cross-agency work than in a more stable, organisational-based team.

Selection to a cross-agency team needs to be well thought through. Not only do team members need to bring

their specific knowledge, but also the attributes above. They also need to have the confidence of their agency and ability to access senior leaders in their agency to update them on progress and explain the analysis that is occurring within the team. A cross-agency team is likely to re-frame a problem and find cross-agency solutions. Senior leaders in agencies need to be engaged with and connected to this process, as ultimately they will be tasked with implementing the results.

3. *The value of outside perspectives*

The Green Paper team found the advice of the two reference groups invaluable in the preparation of the green paper: they provided efficient and effective access to research, evidence and operational knowledge and supported the framing, analysis and write-up of the document. For example, unwanted 'policy jargon' was identified by the frontline forum, and the expert reference group was instrumental in framing the definition of vulnerability.

As this was a document prepared for public debate, the reference groups' insights into how it should be presented and what information should be included were invaluable. Because they met face to face, the Green Paper team was able to understand their debates and the breadth of views around the issues. The reference groups also allowed the Green Paper team to gain an understanding of how the paper would be received, and are proving valuable in promoting public debate now that it has been released.

Eppel et al., (2011) draw the same conclusion about the value of outside perspectives in their case studies of recent New Zealand policy processes.

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They advocate iterative testing of policy assumptions and hypotheses between government agencies and non-government actors throughout the policy process.

4. *The importance of the initial investment in the team*

The short timeframe for developing the green paper underlined the importance of ensuring team members were dedicated and would give priority to the project. Taking time to establish relationships within the team – using workshops – was a good investment. This meant the trust and common purpose needed for robust debate and scrutiny was established quickly.

The fundamentals of building a kaupapa Māori perspective into the team at the very beginning was critical to unravel the 'wicked problem' in question. This was vital to ensure a New Zealand- and topic-relevant end product.

Taking time to work out how team members would relate back to their agencies was also a good investment.

Establishing clear reporting lines at the beginning, with team members spending time both in the cross-agency team space and at their home agency desks, were useful to bridge the 'grey' space in which cross-agency teams operate and maintain opens lines of communication.

Having an independent project leader who was not associated with any of the contributing agencies was viewed as positive by team members and others involved in the process. A neutral leader, without a single agency interest, avoids potential conflicts. Nor can the importance of good administrative support be underestimated. The needs of cross-agency teams do not fit comfortably with the systems and processes of host departments. Having someone who can navigate around these and advocate for the team in terms of the information technology, human resource, travel and meeting room needs will save much time and frustration.

Working across sectors: observations from the frontline forum and expert reference group members

Members of the frontline forum reported that they appreciated the opportunity to comment and be part of the development of the green paper. In particular, the opportunity to be engaged in the process

from start to finish was appreciated; as was the opportunity for face-to-face debate and the understanding of other perspectives this allowed.

Members of the expert reference group found the process a useful means of bringing policy and research paradigms together to solve a common problem in a short period of time. They reported that the process showed transparency in dealing with the wicked problem and that they could see directly their input into the final product.

Future opportunities

Tight timeframes, the Green Paper team argue, are no excuse for not approaching a policy problem from a cross-agency perspective when the nature of problem indicates the need for such an approach. A well-established and clearly mandated team can achieve good solutions in a timely and cost-effective fashion.

From our experience, the Green Paper team would recommend future collaborative teams working on 'wicked problems' be supported as follows:

- Thought being given to how the policy process is structured at the commissioning phase: is the problem best solved by a lead agency defining and solving an issue and seeking peer review from other agencies; or

is it a 'wicked problem' that needs a collaborative approach to both defining the problem and addressing it?

- The preparation of a job description of the personal attributes needed for cross-agency work and team members being selected accordingly. If possible, a 'neutral' leader should be appointed.
- Cross-agency team leaders giving thought to how they create a team. Using workshops, encouraging team members to get to know each other, and identifying and discussing individual and team strengths are strategies that worked for the Green Paper team.
- Thought being given to how 'outside' perspectives are included in policy development processes, at the problem definition phase and throughout the process. Establishing reference groups in this case was a cost-effective and time-efficient way of bringing frontline delivery and research perspectives into a process.

Our final conclusion would most definitely be that cross-agency working and working across sectors involves a fair dose of pragmatism – rolling up ones sleeves and finding ways forward – and good coffee.

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