

Ken Warren

A New Model of Collaboration

Abstract

Government agencies must collaborate at the front line to succeed in addressing complex problems (e.g., assisting individuals and families with multiple needs). Previous attempts to improve front-line collaboration have had limited success. A different approach, using the insights of comparative institutional economics and public governance literature, would focus on the principles that underpin successful public sector collaboration. A specialist hierarchical system (i.e. the current system) places different expectations, performance characteristics, information needs and accountabilities on public servants than a collaborative, network-based system does. This article outlines five design principles to guide the development of a new collective¹ model as a separate but connected system in the New Zealand public sector. The proposed model would help draw citizens, iwi, NGOs and others into more collaborative and constructive relationships with the government to pursue the resolution of the most complex and important challenges our country faces.

Keywords accountability, complex problems, collaboration, collective operating model, institutional design, public sector management

Collaboration has long been considered a challenge for New Zealand's system of public management. The relatively fragmented and devolved nature of the New Zealand public sector has been noted in each of the major reviews of the current system. For instance, in 1996, in *Public Management: the New Zealand model*, Boston et al. described the task of effectively coordinating the multitude of formally autonomous yet functionally interdependent organisations that constitute the public sector as a 'continuing dilemma'. The same theme surfaced in the Logan report at the start of the Bolger government, in the 'Review of the Centre' at the start of the Clark government, and in the 'Better Public Services' review at the start of the Key government. It has re-emerged in the current 'spirit of public service' and 'public finance modernisation' reform efforts.

In recent years both the New Zealand Productivity Commission, drawing on collective impact literature, and the Welfare Expert Advisory Group, posing a challenge to move to 'whakamana tāngata' – restoring dignity to people so they can participate meaningfully with their families and

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communities – have emphasised a more collaborative approach for improving the wellbeing of citizens with complex needs. The experience of Whānau Ora, as reported by the Whānau Ora Review Panel, shows that such a collaborative approach results in positive changes and creates the conditions for those changes to be sustainable.

Taken together, these recent reports make the case for reform to use collaborative methods to achieve better outcomes for people with complex needs who have difficulties accessing public services. Also, however, the reports highlight that getting such collaborative approaches working successfully in the public sector is hard. But why is this the case? Why is it so difficult to make the public service management system more collaborative at the front line? In my working paper *Designing a New Collective Operating and Funding Model in the New Zealand Public Sector* (Warren, 2021), on which this article is based, I tackle this question directly, and propose a response for front-line collaboration, designed on five design principles.

The nature of the problem

The problem of collaboration is not resolved by centralisation and consolidation. Any bureaucracy necessarily has a hierarchical structure and therefore consists of many silos. These can be made with thinner walls and leaders can try and make them less parochial, but the silos cannot be eliminated.

Governments require senior bureaucrats whose influence is derived from their knowledge and experience. That expertise and merit legitimises the use of the state's power to improve the lives of citizens. However, the expert's narrow focus itself prevents well-understood anticipation of the broader impact of the change they bring about. Expertise is needed, but structuring organisations to build depth of expertise militates against the development of breadth. Instead of creating a single integrated perspective on a problem, government experts have perspectives on different parts of a problem, and their organisations have parallel responsibilities for fragments of complex issues. This necessarily creates diffusion

within the government and frequently contradictory actions. When it comes to complex issues, the government becomes entangled, battling itself and private sector entities for funding and turf.

Organisational solutions of a structural nature commonly attempt to include both centralisation and fragmentation. Centralisation, however, does not break down the walls – for example, between policy and operations entities; it merely changes the position of the wall to one between head office and the front line. Fragmentation – the creation of collaborative task forces and collaboration

to their own departmental interests. In addition to the various task forces and working groups on which many serve, the chief executives meet regularly to discuss current issues. (Schick, 1996)

From this practitioner's perspective, that is as true today as it was when it was written in 1996. Public servants do try to work with each other. Nevertheless, the innate nature of bureaucracies makes collaboration challenging, particularly when seeking to improve the lives of people with complex needs who have difficulties accessing public services.

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units – while leaving the hierarchy unchanged renders these constrained in their impact.

These internationally recognised difficulties with collaboration in hierarchies are shared by the New Zealand government. New Zealand does, however, have some natural advantages in comparison with most. As Allen Schick has commented:

Formal policy coordination is reinforced by networks that make for more cohesion and cross fertilisation than is found in most countries. New Zealand's small size and Wellington's village atmosphere foster the rapid diffusion of information and ideas. News travels fast, and managers have a lively interest in what is happening elsewhere in government. New Zealand is not a country in which public managers work in isolation. Interdepartmental work is valued; chief executives and senior managers do not shirk this responsibility, nor do they regard it as unproductive or unrelated

Defining the problem as one of organisational structure, resolvable by organisation restructuring, or as one of behavioural recalcitrance, resolvable by exhortations to collaborate better, have had limited success, both in New Zealand over the last 30 years, and overseas, where there are larger bureaucratic structures to compare.

An institutional (or rules of the game) problem and solution

A wealth of research and academic thinking from various disciplines proposes different and new insights into the problem of collaboration.

The institutional economics literature, for instance, highlights that:

- Institutions, or the rules of the game, matter (e.g., North, 1991; Gorringer, 2001). The operating and funding rules of the public sector management system represent such an institution, enabling and enforcing the current operating and funding models.
- There are benefits from distinguishing between markets, bureaucracies and

Table 1: Comparing different models

	Market transactions	Hierarchical specialisation	Outcome-based collaboration
Expectations	Contract terms	Public value	Shared goals
Operating model	Value-add through provider/funder surplus	Value-add through specialist skill	Value-add through collaboration
Information needs	Low information asymmetry, open markets	Fast feedback loops from system	Fast feedback loops from citizens
Accountability for	Performance conditions in contracts	The efficiency, equity and sustainability of the provision of services	Commitment to shared goals and the ability to achieve them
Accountability to	Funder	Hierarchy	Citizens
Accountability direction	Between funder and provider	Up through the hierarchy	Horizontal between collaboration participants
Accountability against	Non-performance	Hierarchical misalignment	Free-riders and hold-outs
Trade-offs favour	Compliance with contract terms	Equity and efficiency	Effectiveness
Funding	Contract consideration	Relationships, services	Collectives

clans (or networks). Markets are most efficient where prices can mediate transactions (i.e., performance clarity is high) and the need for goal congruence is low. Hierarchy is most efficient where managerial authority mediates transactions within a bureaucracy and goal alignment is moderate. Finally, networks/clans are most efficient where performance clarity is low but the need for goal congruence is high. Trust, shared values and a shared sense of mutual dependence mediate transactions (Ouchi, 1980).

- In addition to governments and markets, common-pool resource institutions can effectively manage challenging problems such as the commons. Doing so requires adherence to design principles, including a clear definition of the collective, adaptation to local conditions, participatory decision making, effective monitoring, graduated sanctions, conflict resolution mechanisms, effective communication, trust and reciprocity (Ostrom, 1990).

Turning to the public management and public governance literature, the following points deserve emphasis:

- institutional accountability: there are limits to principal-agent theory, as a string of findings in accountability research identifies a recurring theme of drifting principals (not holding agents accountable) rather than drifting agents (not being accountable to principals) (Schillemans and Busuioac, 2015);
- craftsmanship: getting public sector agencies to work together is a distinguishable craft (Bardach, 1998);
- governance design: just as markets and hierarchies can be deliberately designed and deployed as a governance mechanism, cross-sector collaboration (including networks) can also be deliberately designed (Bryson, Crosby and Stone, 2015);
- collaborative governance: this has emerged as a new form of governance to supplement managerial modes of policy making and implementation. Collaborative governance brings public and private stakeholders together in collective forums to engage in consensus-oriented decision making. Factors critical to the success of such collaborations include face-to-face dialogue, trust building, and the

development of commitment and shared understanding. Virtuous cycles tend to develop when collaborative forums focus on ‘small wins’ that deepen trust, commitment and shared understanding (e.g., Ansell and Gash, 2008);

- collaborative advantage: achieving collaborative advantage requires grappling with aims, purpose, membership, trust, power, identity and leadership. Because joint working between organisations is inherently difficult and time consuming, it should not be undertaken unless there is the potential for real collaborative advantage (Huxham and Vangen, 2013);
- complexity: in complex situations not all outcomes can be identified, let alone their probabilities, and there are different views about the nature of problems, their causes and solutions. Pragmatic responses to the radical uncertainty generated include allowing for uncertainty, contingency, co-evolution of problems and solutions drawing on multiple perspectives (Eppel and Karacaoglu, 2017);
- network management: there are limitations on and challenges to the capacity of governments to control self-organising networks, but also strategies to manage in the face of those limitations (Kickert, Klijn and Koppenjan, 1997);
- conductive agencies: there is value in the ‘conductive’ agencies that engage in dismantling state agency boundaries by connecting with a variety of organisations and interests to enhance performance (Agranov, 2012).

The literature differentiates markets, hierarchies and networks. They each represent different models of operation, as Table 1 illustrates. A public service that does not adequately allow for these differences will be suboptimal. More importantly, each model has its place, and each is important for the overall functioning of the public service.

Market transactions should be used for services that can easily be specified and measured, and where there are open, active and orderly markets. The merit-based politically neutral public service is best suited

to developing the deep experience, expertise and institutional knowledge to provide high-quality free and frank advice to ministers, and reliable services to the public. But if we are to successfully tackle the most complex problems of society, for which ready answers are not available, then the system also needs to actively enable outcome-based collaboration in networks. The choice is no longer just between buy or make. It is between buy, make and enable. The problem of collaboration is often one of trying to apply make-or-buy models when these are not appropriate.

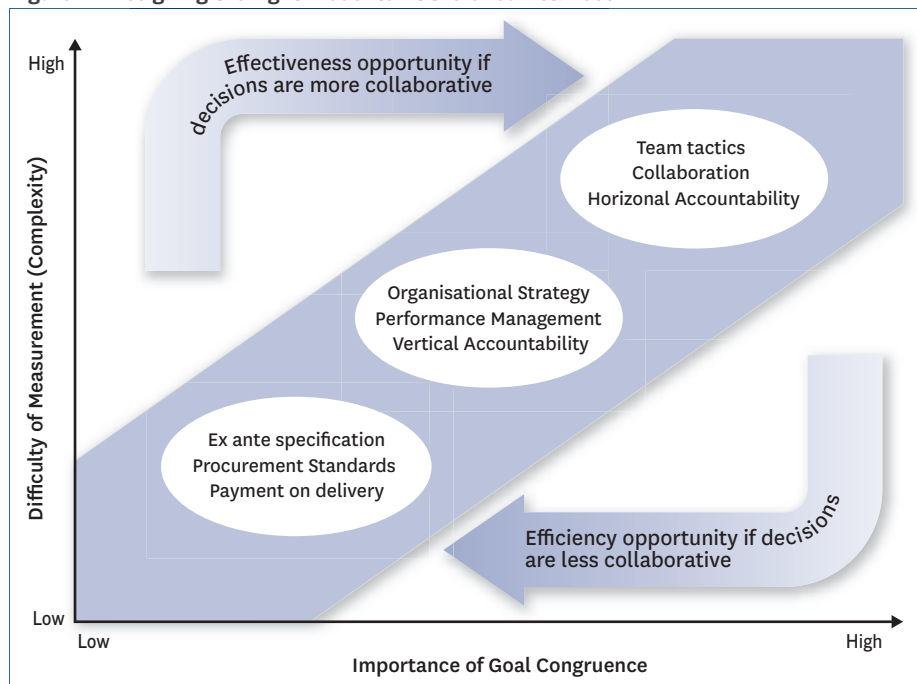
In my working paper I suggest that each of these models needs to be legitimised, with each recognised as a separate ‘centre of gravity’ in our public management system. We should not design our system around one model; rather, we should design our system to favour the most appropriate model given the circumstances. There is a golden path (see Figure 1) and there are opportunities to be grasped by moving back to that path where we have strayed. Consequently, leaving aside the contract or funder–purchaser model, which operates well where the measurement of performance is straightforward, a dual system is needed to enable and legitimise both specialist hierarchical and collective models to flourish in the public sector.

Design principles for a collective model

To achieve this, five design principles for implementing such a change are proposed.

1. The public sector management system should develop a separate (dual) centre of gravity for the collective model, rather than seek to extend current models.
2. Collective models should be targeted at complex variegated problems where interventions need to be adaptable at a local level, and outcomes are emergent rather than predictable and controllable.
3. Collective operating models should:
 - a. support the flexibility of thought and action required to deal with novel or unanticipated opportunities and problems;
 - b. motivate participants with challenging and achievable goals; and
 - c. work to develop understanding and trust across agency–professional roles and boundaries.

Figure 1: Designing the right model to fit the circumstances



4. The responsibility of the public sector hierarchy should not be to steer collective entities, but to create the environment in which the smart practices necessary for self-governing collective operating models can flourish.
5. The mana of the collective should be used both as a basis for providing funding for collective entities and as a basis for accountability for the results of that funding.

Principle 1: dual centre of gravity

The case for a dual centre of gravity for the collective model has largely been made above. Collective models have their place, and they are different. I use the term ‘centre of gravity’ because, while I recognise that there is a spectrum between the two models, they both need to be legitimised. Trying only to extend a specialist model to a collective model will have limited success. On the one hand, important internal controls to get alignment in the hierarchy are downgraded. On the other hand, the poor fit between the specialist model’s accountability mechanisms and the collective frustrates everyone. The hierarchy is compromised; the legitimacy of the collective model is questioned. The struggles Whānau Ora has encountered attest to this.

The argument for a separate, legitimised centre of gravity in the system is not that

specialist models cannot collaborate, nor that collective models cannot employ specialisms. Rather, the critical point is that because our current specialist/hierarchical model’s assumption is that value is primarily added through specialisation, when trade-offs must be made those trade-offs must favour hierarchical specialisation, even when inappropriate.

To make the theory real, consider the case of a government department that is tasked with convening a community-led strategy, while at the same time implementing a ministerially led strategy. This is not unheard of. Essentially, the same staff are being asked to sell a minister/chief executive strategy to communities, and community strategies to their minister/ chief executive, and there are bound to be differences, if not significant conflicts, between the two. There are few better ways to get that department spinning its wheels and losing traction. In the end, however, in our current system the trade-offs will favour the hierarchy. Used appropriately, in complex situations, a separate centre of gravity will legitimise trade-offs favouring the community. A dual centre of gravity allows the development of environments more conducive to both specialist/hierarchical activity and collaborative activity. Importantly, it brings any conflict between the two out into the open for debate.

Principle 2: collective models targeted at the complex

However, that example also illustrates the disruptive nature of collective activity. To ensure that disruption occurs where it is needed, and not where it is not, the second principle is that collective models should be targeted at complex variegated problems where interventions need to be adaptable at a local level, and outcomes are emergent rather than predictable and controllable.

This is what the literature says, and it makes practical sense as well. Collaboration means people proposing to one another

recognise that collectives of this nature are fuelled by their shared purpose and goals and not by government funding. This principle is more a warning to the bureaucracy not to demotivate than a proposal to motivate.

Principle 4: self-governing, not centrally governed collectives

The fourth principle is that the responsibility of the public sector hierarchy should not be to steer collective entities, but rather to create the environment in which the smart practices necessary for self-governing collective operating models can flourish.

We cannot allow unelected collectives untrammelled power to spend public money as they wish – and so often the refrain is currently heard: ‘You can’t do that under the Public Finance Act!’

that they do things differently and better – and of course disagreeing profoundly about what ‘better’ means and whether the other person’s better might actually be worse. Such debates are appropriate for complex variegated problems, but should be constrained when success is more easily measurable. The second principle avoids the harm of too much collaboration slowing down needed government activity.

Principle 3: promote key success factors of collectives

The third principle should be relatively uncontroversial. It is derived from evidence about what makes collaborative activity a success. Collective activity tackling complex problems needs flexibility of thought and rapid actions to deal with novel or unanticipated opportunities and problems. It also needs motivated participants who come from diverse professional roles but have the understanding and trust to operate inclusively. A caveat here, however, is that this principle is about the responsibility of the collective, not the responsibility of the government. The government must

This principle may be more challenging to some. Derived primarily from public governance literature, it comes from the insight that self-governing collectives cannot be steered from the outside.

More importantly, it requires a reconceptualisation of how governments successfully tackle complex problems. Under this principle, the old view that the government can ‘steer’ complex transformations in a coherent and coordinated way as the central governing authority in society changes to a more realistic view of government as a critical actor among many influencing complex policy processes.

The old paradigm was of the government-led transformation, whereby evidence-informed policy making led to a consensus view on a complex policy design and a technical and non-political implementation programme. Under this paradigm, failure would be due to incorrect assumptions about the impact of interventions on outcomes, or lack of control, so the solutions offered would be to rationalise policies, clarify policy goals and centralise control to achieve success.

For complex problems, and in developing complex, variegated and dynamic solutions, that model is unrealistic because ministers cannot access the necessary information. That is not just because of their limited bandwidth, but also because of great environmental, economic and social uncertainties. The centralisation model ignores the importance of non-steerable values and interests of implementing bodies and target groups, including Māori, and the uncertainties about how these will change in the future.

Under a more up-to-date and realistic paradigm, complex policy delivery is about co-operation between different interdependent parties with different, conflicting rationalities, interests and strategies. Complex policy delivery is not the simple implementation of ex ante formulations, but an interactive process in which individuals and groups exchange information about problems, preferences and means, and trade off goals and resources. In short, complex policy delivery is not directed, it is negotiated.

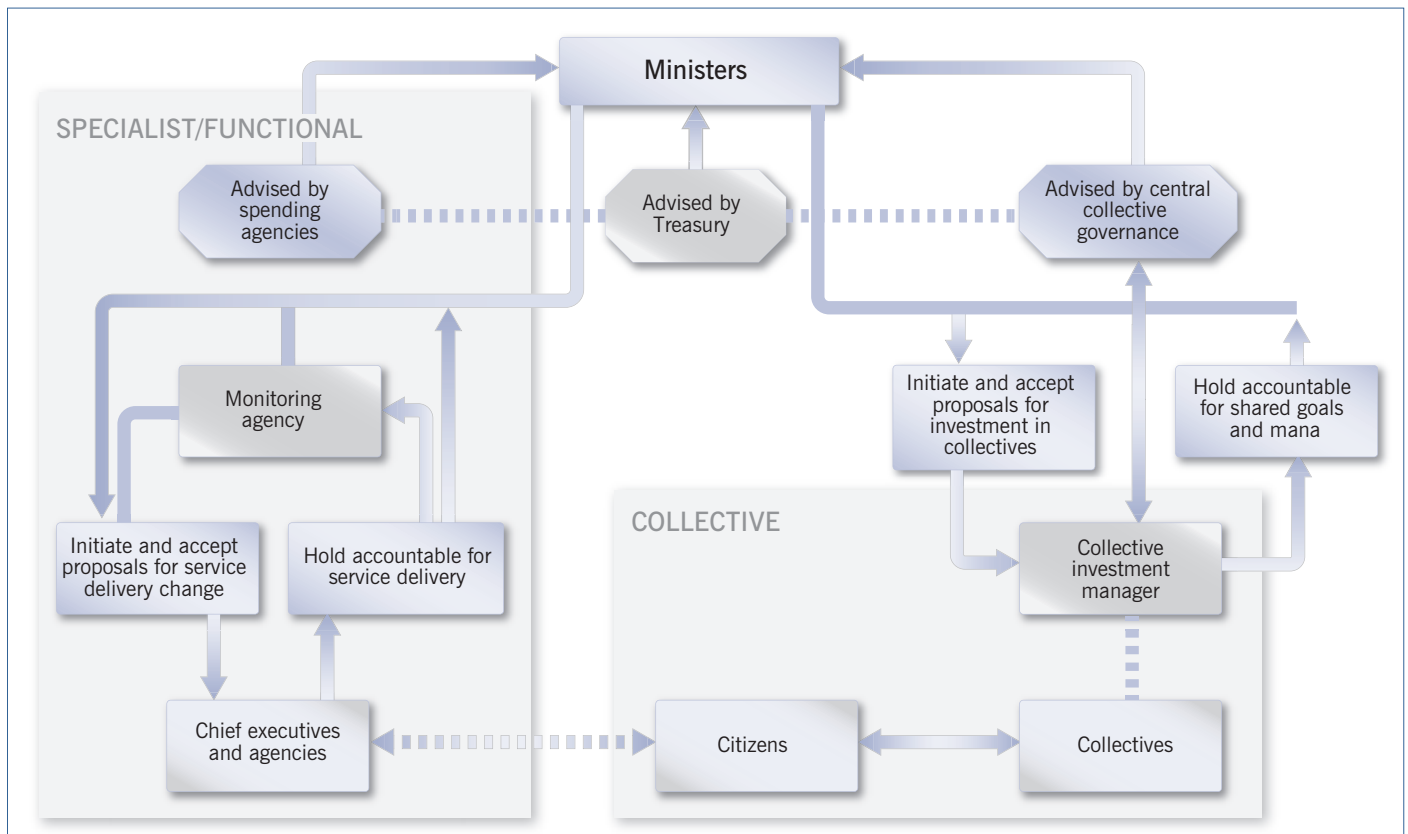
The government has a critical role. It has resources at its disposal not available to other parties – notably a monopoly on the use of force, economic power, and an ability to marshal deep expertise. It must deploy these resources to create the environment in which the smart practices necessary for self-governing collective operating models can flourish. Importantly, however, governments may have less leeway than others – checks and balances, and concern about legitimacy derived from political backing. Faced with a choice between legitimacy and effectiveness, governments are likely to choose legitimacy.

In this new conceptualisation, success is measured differently. It is measured on assessments as to whether networks achieve win-win situations, whether individuals, groups and resources are motivated as necessary, whether transaction costs are limited, and the level of commitments to networks that are procured.

Principle 5: a new accountability

That leads to the fifth and final principle. If we want success measured that way, then our measurement, decision-making

Figure 2: A dual public sector model



and accountability processes for collective activity need to be designed to support that. I am proposing that the mana of the collective could be used both as a basis for providing funding for collective entities, and as a basis for accountability for the results of that funding. I recognise that mana is a deep and multi-layered concept, about which I have very limited knowledge; however, it seems to offer great prospects for a beneficial paradigm shift for how the government interacts with collectives. The proposal would need development with and by mana whenua.

This is a direct attempt to tackle the funding and accountability problem that has bedevilled efforts at collaboration to date. We live in a democracy; elected officials garner support for their policies, and it is their right to spend the public's money in accordance with the mandate they have earned. We cannot allow unelected collectives untrammelled power to spend public money as they wish – and so often the refrain is currently heard: 'You can't do that under the Public Finance Act!'

My proposal respects that constitutional position. Ministers would remain responsible for the portfolio of collective investments, but they would justify that

portfolio not on the basis of outputs or outcomes, but rather on the basis of their officials' assessment, that they endorse, that the portfolio of collective investments have the necessary respect or mana to achieve positive outcomes.

There needs to be an alternative to output-based accountability where we cannot specify the desired outputs or services to be funded. There needs to be an alternative to outcome-based accountability where we cannot be confident of the attribution of funding to outcomes, and when the outcomes emerge over the long term. My new option is accountability for mana, where ministers can express confidence that the mana of the collective groups being supported means they are more likely to engender positive outcomes and wellbeing in complex areas than relying on the mainstream public service.

This is possible because it is measurable. A regular scored assessment could be made of:

- the quality of the shared vision;
- the quality of engagement with the government in negotiating priorities in the light of local knowledge;

- the capacity of the collective, including its 'convening power';
- the leadership of the collective, and its skills for working with other people;
- the legitimacy of the collective as a leader in the community, with the 'right' participants collaborating to make it work;
- the commitment of participants in the collective to invest time in collaborative efforts for success;
- the levels of trust participants in the collective have in one another;
- the adaptability of the collective to changing conditions;
- the pace of development of the collective.

Decision making, funding and accountability based on these attributes recognises their importance. As they are relevant, and as the institutional framework behind the dual model pivots towards recognising their importance, so the mana of collectives in our communities is nourished.

Key roles and responsibilities for public sector collaboratives

I suggest that doing this successfully requires the articulation of two new

roles: namely, the government's collective investment manager and the collective's treasurer. The relationship between them represents the nexus where the hierarchical/specialist world of the government and the horizontal collaborative world of the community collective connect. This nexus is illustrated in Figure 2.

The collective investment management role is not easy. It includes advice on which entities to build relationships with, assessment of collective impact vehicles, promulgation of learnings for experience, and nursing the evolution of the supply of collectives that are aligned with government objectives. It is part hedge fund manager, part social entrepreneur, part confidant and part public servant. Therefore, an entity that brings those diverse skills together is required, rather than relying on superheroes.

The collective investment management function must not seek to micromanage the collective. In a real and different sense, the collective investment manager is just as accountable to the collective for the measured attributes listed above as the collective is accountable to it.

Because complex issues traverse the current functional sectors (e.g., health, education, justice, environment), that entity needs to be a new cross-functional entity in the public sector. Only then can it develop cross-agency proposals, to partner and manage relationships in a way not possible by specialist ministries, whose incentives are to develop proposals within their own domains and sectors.

The relationship between the collective investment manager and the treasurer is

different from that of funder-provider. The collective investment manager's task is to create and sustain the collective processes, measurement reporting systems and community leadership that enable cross-sector coalitions to arise and thrive. These proposals legitimise such activity in a way that simply cannot happen today. Practically, this enabling activity could be just as much through providing backbone services, or research access to the integrated data infrastructure, for example, as providing collectives with more direct access to the government's budget process.

The treasurer's role in the collective is also important. The treasurer of the collective would work with the government's collective investment manager. However, as a member of the collective, the treasurer is primarily accountable to other members of the collective for ensuring the provision of funding and probity. The treasurer is not held accountable for the collective impact entity's inputs, outputs or outcomes, which is the responsibility of the collective to manage. The treasurer is responsible for meeting the information demands of the collective investment manager about the mana of the collective, so that the investor's role can be performed.

Conclusion

Governments must collaborate at the front line to succeed in complex situations. Attempts to improve front-line collaboration by changing organisation structures or by exhorting public servants to collaborate have had limited success in satisfactorily achieving this collaboration.

Academic research and practical experience both point to a different problem definition causing this lack of collaboration than organisational structure or behavioural recalcitrance. They both differentiate between specialist hierarchical models that assume that public value is added by application of a specialist process, and collaborative network models that assume that public value is added by collaboration. These two types of models have substantially different expectations, performance characteristics, information needs and accountabilities. Both models are legitimate, and both must be designed into the public sector system to thrive in situations when that is appropriate.

This article has proposed design principles that could be used to develop a collective model as a separate but connected system in the New Zealand public sector. Designing a new collective model along these lines could be transformative for New Zealand. A new legitimised model, more welcoming of complexity and disruption, used where needed, has the potential to draw citizens, iwi, NGOs and others into more collaborative and constructive relationships with the government. It provides new opportunities to pursue the resolution of the most complex and important challenges our country faces.

¹ While some literature distinguishes between collective impact and collaboration, this article is concerned with the more important, and more useful, distinction between specialisation and collaboration. The term collective model is intended to include collective impact models, but also includes other models where public value is primarily added through collaborative activity.

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