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SHARING RESOURCES

Are there websites that you use to seek help on management and leadership issues? If so, let us know, so we can spread the word. Would you use such a website if one was available?

FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON UNRULINESS

*This was to be a presentation to a conference of non profit, community service agencies that had to be postponed. As you read, imagine yourself part of a group of people who have come together to talk about restoring the links between communities and community service agencies. I thought it might serve to create a virtual conference via the newsletter. Your reflections are welcomed. The conversation will continue in the next newsletter. To add to the discussion, the sidebars contain selected quotes from a 1987 article by John McKnight on *Regenerating Community*.*

It's exciting to be here, to be part of a more open conversation about the issues and paradoxes that are deeply troubling many non profit organizations, and particularly community service agencies. Many of these conversations are taking place, in people's individual hearts and souls - in small circles over coffee, in the hallways, and at the water cooler. What is important about this conference is bringing the troubles, the fears, the hopes, and the frustrations out into the open, so that we can explore where we might go together.

The structures we have built so far to work together (for example: interagency committees, social planning councils, and provincial federations), are not working well enough as arenas to probe the deeper issues. In those circles, we focus largely on services, funding, and operational concerns; and, on our panics and fears about today and yesterday. They are largely shaped by reactions to the institutionalized service system.

The issues, for me, are not about whether we have, or will have, services to meet community needs. We have lots of those. In fact, over the past 15 years, the number of services and the total service funding pot have grown considerably.

Is The Word, "Community", In Community Service Agencies An Oxymoron?

No matter what happens, the services will continue, in one way or another. We can debate whether there is enough funding. We can debate cutbacks. We can debate who can best deliver these services: public organizations, private businesses, regional quasi-public conglomerates, small niche-based non profits, or multi-service agencies. We can debate unionization and province-wide bargaining. We can debate outcome measures, standards, reporting processes, accountability, and accreditations. And, we can debate staff burnouts and risk management.

These are important operational and staff issues. If we do not deal with them well, our organizations will become unglued, staff and volunteers will burn themselves out, and service quality will suffer. However, the services will remain! They have become an expected, and required, part of our local community fabrics.

Civic Society, Community Development, And Social Action

The real issues, for me, are twofold. First, what will it take to help create communities that are alive, vibrant, supportive, and whole in a post modern world? We need to talk about civil society, community development, community economic development, community cultural development, community capacity building, and even community organizing.

Why Bother Keeping The Voluntary Sector Alive?

Second, separately, but linked I think, do we need a voluntary sector? And, if so, why, and what might it look like ten or fifteen years further out? Underneath, my sense is that the voluntary sector, as a whole, is losing its soul. Our passions are withering, and eroding. Our foundational stories no longer stir us, or make much sense.

The troubles that we are struggling with are not so much about how do we relate to government, and what services should we provide, but why do we continue to exist as voluntary organizations?

Much of what the voluntary sector and, in particular, the community services sector, has become has been shaped by two powerful forces: professionalization of the sector, and our relations with government, particularly the Provincial government.

The first force has to do with the long historical transfer of power to staff and managers, away from Boards and volunteers. It parallels the rise of the welfare state. It has much to do with the increasing complexity of the issues that our clients are facing. In McKnight's terms, it is about institutionalizing the helping.

... the most common social policy map has two locations: institutions and individual people. By institutions we mean large structures such as corporations, universities, and government mental health systems. ... these newly designed hierarchical, managed service systems do not produce goods such as steel, they do produce needs assessments, service plans, protocols, and procedures. They are also thought, by some policymakers, to produce health, education, security, or justice. ... [the individuals] make a complete economic world by acting as the users (consumers) of the products of managed institutional producers ...

The first problem with programs based upon the typical social policy map is that in spite of ever-growing inputs into institutionalized service systems, many individuals continue to reject their role as consumers. This is the problem of intractability that has resulted in an increasing focus upon the "compliance" issue. Especially in our big cities, many intractable young individuals continue to refuse to learn in spite of heightened resources and managerial inputs to school systems. This is commonly known as the educational problem. Similarly, there are many other intractable individuals who refuse to behave in spite of our correctional institutions. This is the crime problem.... The second problem with programs based upon the typical social policy map is that the sum of their costs can be greater than the wealth of the nation.

The second force, from my reading, is much less about particular politics, or specific politicians or civil servants; and, much more do with some underlying and very powerful forces for change. We are all, staff, managers, Board members, volunteers, funders, and regulators, caught up in these changes together.

Will Our Managers Survive?

The changes that have occurred in the community services sector have meant that management, and Board work, has become more and more complex, time consuming, difficult, and costly. I wonder whether we have reached the point where the competency of the sector is no longer strong enough to meet the operational challenges out there. I wonder whether there really is a role for Boards in all of this. I wonder whether some organizations will survive, or even should survive. Perhaps, small community service agencies are an oxymoron.

If we are going to discover, create, and live new life as voluntary organizations in local communities, I believe we are going to have to make radical changes in how we think about, imagine, structure, and fund our organizations. This will require longer term thinking, much more attention to the winds of change, a readiness to risk that we have let erode, and a whole new language to tell our fundamental stories. And, we are going to have to transform the deeper cultures of our organizations, that have become, so much, expressions of service issues.

We can capture the underlying forces of change in the following words: growth in the size and complexity of service systems, rising demands for consistency in service availability and quality, fear of failure, and creeping restraint - leading to greater rationalization, control, unionization, accountability, and regulation.

Over the past 15 years, the number of community services, the funding, the number of community service agencies, and the size of community service agencies have grown significantly; to the point where, I believe, the system began to collapse in on itself; and, collectively there was a tacitly felt need to make some greater sense of it all. We can blame all of this on Judith Korbin, if we like; but, in the final analysis, I do not think this will wash. We were all part of the growth and the collapse.

From “Contractors” To “Public Service Providers”

We are shifting from thinking in contract language terms, muddy as that was, to thinking in terms of being public service providers and employers. Community service agencies are no longer contractors, they are much more like crown corporations. Community service agencies, or at least those that are primarily based on Provincial funding, are not, and will not be independent from government. The term, community service agencies, may no longer make much sense.

It is obvious, upon the briefest reflection, that the typical social policy map is inaccurate because it excludes a major social domain - the community. By community, we mean the social place used by family, friends, neighbourhood associations, clubs, civil groups, local enterprises, churches, ethnic associations, temples, local unions, local government, and local media. In addition to being called the community, this social environment is also described as the informal sector, the unmanaged environment, and the associational sector.

These associations of community represent unique social tools that are unlike the social tool represented by a managed institution. For example, the structure of institutions is a design established to create control of people. On the other hand, the structure of associations is the result of people acting through consent. It is critical that we distinguish between these two motive forces because there are many goals that can only be fulfilled through consent, and these are often goals that will be impossible to achieve through a production system designed to control.

One of the pieces we might want to talk about is whether the public service provider paradigm will last, how long it will last, and what might come next. My own read is that it will not last, and that, sometime 10-15 years out, a new paradigm will emerge. In systems theory, there is a fundamental principle that, to be sustainable, systems must have, internally, the same order of diversity, as there is in the external environment. The public service provider model fails here. But, I have no idea of what might come next.

Demands for greater service consistency have come from a number of sources: the rational thinking of contract managers, the media, professionalization of service fields and hence increased attention to standards, the shift in public thinking from seeing services as community goods to seeing them as individual rights, and the movement of urban expectations outwards.

From the point of view of consumers and funders, consistency may be a good thing. However, it has meant that diversity in local community service agencies is no longer desirable. And, the old story we told that local community organizations are important because they respond to unique local needs and conditions no longer holds water.

Particularly in the area of services to children and families, we have lived, for some five years now, a story of "no failure is allowed". From the Gove report through to the recent Supreme Court decisions about vicarious liability, we expect "no mistakes", we brook "no failures", and we expect much higher levels of risk management. Prospective Board members are asking: What risk management policies are in place?

These Trends Are Not Just About Social And Health Services. They Are Playing Out In Child Care, Social Housing, The Arts, Education, ...

All of these forces, in an increasingly restraint oriented environment - largely still dominated by male, rational, and hierarchical decision-making and planning models - have given rise to the major changes we have been living through in the community services sector, and will continue to live through for some time: unionization, province-wide bargaining, more and more regulation and standards, more and more decisions made Provincially, tighter and tighter "contract" requirements, and more and more time spent on paperwork.

A new paradigm for the relationships between the Provincial government, community service agencies, and clients will not likely emerge until these forces have played themselves out; and other winds of change have emerged.

What Choices Do We Want To Make?

It seems to me that as voluntary organizations, we face a choice. Either we choose to become an integral part of this public service delivery system, or we stay right out of it. There is no way to choose to stay in, and yet be independent. That may sound bleak; but it is, I believe, the way it is right now, and will be for sometime.

One strategy that some have looked at, paralleling a position put forward some years ago by VON Canada, is to develop our organizations with three or four different arms and legs: a community development arm, a handful of services based on volunteer delivery, a contracting with government leg, and a private business foot. There are some successes with this approach, though mostly based in the long established agencies such as the Y.W.C.A., Y.M.C.A., and Big Brothers. They have assets to invest in the future.

The challenge is that each arm and each leg, each hand and foot, has a very different culture; and, as a result, the whole body becomes easily torn apart and fragmented. The requirements for success from Executive Directors and Boards are enormous. If this strategy is to really work, I suspect that we will need to re-create each arm and leg and foot as a different corporate subsidiary, held together in some kind of looser federation or holding company. Our community service agencies would look more like spider plants.

Deep Organizational Culture Counts

This leads me back into my second theme, the issue of increasing complexity. The changing relationships with the Provincial government, employers' associations, larger federations, and unions; and, increasing regulation, has meant that the knowledge and skills we require from senior managers in community service organizations has jumped at least one order of magnitude, and perhaps two.

I watch Executive Directors spending more and more time, seeking legal and other advice, on more and more intricate operational issues. Mistakes are costly. I watch many Executive Directors, senior managers, and Boards struggling.

There are many unique characteristics of the community of associations. The associations in community are interdependent. To weaken one is to weaken all. If the local newspaper closes, the garden club and the township meeting will each diminish as they lose a voice. ...

The community environment is constructed around the recognition of fallibility rather than the ideal. Most institutions, on the other hand, are designed with a vision imagining a structure where things can be done right, a kind of orderly perfection achieved, and the ablest dominate.

Community structures tend to proliferate until they create a place for everyone, no matter how fallible. They provide vehicles that give voice to diversity and assume that consensual contribution is the primary value. In the proliferation of community associations, there is room for many leaders and the development of leadership capacity among many. This democratic opportunity structure assumes that the best idea is the sum of the knowings of the collected fallible people who are citizens.

Associations have the capacity to respond quickly. They do not need to involve all of the institutional interests incorporated in a planning committee, budget office, administrative staff, and so forth. A primary characteristic of people who need help is created by the unexpected tragedy, the surprise development, the sudden change. While they will be able to stabilize over the long run, what they often need is immediate help. The rapid response capacity of associations, and their interconnectedness, allows for the possibility of immediate assistance without first initiating a person into a system from which they may never leave.

The proliferation and development of community associations allow for the flowering of creative solutions. Institutions tend to require creative ideas to follow channels. However, the non hierarchical nature of the field of associations allows us to see all of the budding ideas and greatly increases our opportunities for social innovation. Because community associations are small, face-to-face groups, the relationship among members is very individualized. They also have the tradition of dealing with non-members as individuals. ... Therefore, associations represent unusual tools for creating "hand-tailored" responses to those who may be in special need or have unique fallibilities.

Our institutions are constantly reforming and reorganizing themselves in an effort to create or allow relationships that can be characterized as "care". Nonetheless, their ministrations consistently commodify themselves and become a service. For many people with uncommon fallibilities, their need is for care rather than a service.

What are we going to do with this challenge? Training helps. Access to advice helps. Consultants and mentors may help. But, in the end, I suspect we will continue to walk a path of larger and larger organizations, not because they achieve economies of scale; but, because they are big enough to hire the diverse expertise required. One strategy we might look at here is building softer alliances, where we can share in senior management resources, such as a regional director of human resources.

Boards Play No Useful Role In Public Or Contracted Services

The complexities, and the shifts of authority, power, and locus of decision-making outwards, also mean that, increasingly, there are no sensible roles for Boards of Directors, at least in the area of "public" or "contracted" services.

Underneath, Boards know this. Many are struggling with what to do now. Some are finding their own answers - such as looking at themselves as relationship builders, networkers, and influencers; not as decision-makers, planners, and monitors. This is not just about the voluntary sector. Boards of colleges, recreation commissions, health regions, and school districts are all facing the same issues!

What I want to suggest for further discussion today is that, if you choose to remain involved in "contracted" services, then keep the Board out of that part of the operation. I doubt they will add value, and their historical role in terms of accountability and oversight is well played by other people and processes. In other words, lets find a radical alternative to saying to Boards: "It's all about fiduciary responsibility". This may, in fact, be a blessing, for it allows Boards, if they so desire, to become active in very different ways.

Today, our society is the site of the struggle between community and institution for the capacities and loyalties of our people. This struggle is never carried out in the abstract. Instead, it occurs each day in the relations of people, the budget decisions of systems, and the public portraits of the media. As one observes this struggle, there appears to be three visions of society that dominate the discourse.

The first is the therapeutic vision. This prospect sees the well-being of the individual as growing from an environment composed of professionals and their services. It envisions a world where there is a professional to meet every need, and the fee to secure each professional service is a right. This vision is .. expressed by those who see the ultimate liberty as "the right to treatment".

The second prospect is the advocacy vision. This approach foresees a world in which labelled people will be in an environment protected by advocates and advocacy groups. It conceives an individual whose world is guarded by legal advocates, support people, self help groups, job developers, and housing locators. Unlike the therapeutic vision, the advocacy approach conceives a defensive wall of helpers to protect an individual against an alien community. It seeks to ensure a person's right to be a functioning individual.

The third approach is the community vision. It sees the goal as "re-communalization" of exiled and labelled individuals. It understands the community as the basic context for enabling people to contribute their gifts. It sees community associations as contexts to create and locate jobs, provide opportunities for recreation and multiple friendships, and to become the political defender of the right of labelled people to be free from exile.

Those who seek to institute the community vision believe that beyond therapy and advocacy is the constellation of community associations. They see a society where those who were once labelled, exiled, treated, counselled, advised, and protected are, instead, incorporated into community where their contributions, capacities, gifts, and fallibilities will allow a network of relationships involving work, recreation, friendship, support, and the political power of being a citizen.

Now, let me come back to my third theme - the need for radically different thinking, structures, stories, and languages. But, first, some notes of caution.

First, as a sector, we are inherently conservative. We play it safe, we avoid thinking in terms of long term investments, we do not like risk - and, our traditional funders (for example: trusts, foundations, service clubs, gaming, and united ways) are likewise. Somehow, we have to get through this wall; and, as well, challenge these funders to do likewise.

Second, long term organizational change only occurs if we have the passions and openness for personal change, and are prepared to commit to the longer term. By longer term, I am thinking in the 7 - 10 year frame. We know that it takes at least that long to fundamentally shift organizational cultures, deep beliefs, and underlying directions.

Further, if there is no "slack capacity" to invest in the future, in terms of time, funds, energies, emotions, and spirits, then organizational change will not occur. In other words, if all of our time goes to managing current contracts with the Provincial government, nothing will shift.

Nothing Will Shift Without Thinking 10 Years Out

Third, and this relates to the point about "slack capacity", most of you will likely choose to continue "contracting", or "being in bed" with the Provincial government. My caution is that we need to see these "contracted" services as standing on their own - not requiring subsidies, or the time of the Board, or all of the time of our senior managers. We cannot afford to have donations, investment incomes, gaming funds, and the like, going to under write poorly funded "public" or "contracted" services.

What About Associational Lives?

I would like to talk about the idea of giving birth in our organizations to what, I have termed, in an earlier client newsletter, our organizational associational lives. This is a term arising from the work of John McKnight on community capacity building. Imagine that a part of your community service agency is a vibrant and alive, voluntary-based community. This part would be separate, but somehow linked to other parts that focus more on service delivery, or research and development.

The idea is to go back to our organizational missions, not to spend useless time re-defining the words, but to see these as a basis for beginning a dialogue and learning process among Board members, members, and citizens. In this thinking, people would become members, not because they support the services, but because they want to become involved in learning and acting on the issues. They are choosing community.

The process would need to stay away from any discussions of services, because once we walk that route we are right back into where we are now. I suggest we think about a minimum of 50% of Board time going in this direction, and seeing what emerges over time. Membership meetings would become much more frequent, more like B'ahai fireside chats.

What About Ensuring Our Own Independent Money And Resources?

We need to think through how we are going to develop pools of money that are ours, with no or little strings attached, to use how we best think, including supporting creating advocacy networks and developing associational lives. Without independent money, there is little point in talking about interdependent partnerships with government. This likely means traditional fund raising approaches, planned giving, and endowment funds. It may also involve creating entrepreneurial ventures that make profits. Finally, it also means tapping into the natural resources that all communities have. In every community, there are individuals who advocate, lead, support, mediate, heal, and teach without ever considering that that is what they are doing.

What About Looser Alliances?

I would like to talk about looser alliances, or federations of organizations, where we can support each other in what we are trying to accomplish, both in terms of managing public services, and in creating new ventures, and in building associational lives. We have some examples to look at, such as the Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy and the United Community Services Co-operative.

These alliances or federations, however, will have to be more formal than our current interagency groupings. They need common plans, visions, ways of operating, values, and beliefs - glue to hold them together, and hold our collective feet to the fire.

What About Creating Truly Unruly Organizations?

I do not want to suggest that our organizations should be totally unruly - that is not possible if we want to continue to deliver public services. Nevertheless, we need deep pockets of unruliness in our organizations - what used to be called "skunk works" in the corporate sector. Perhaps, we need to think about recreating our community service agencies as looser federations of smaller agencies, that are more family-like and less rule bound.

We need to recognize that different parts of our organizations will be, and need to be, at varying points in the loops of change, to use David Hurst's analogy: from creating new ideas, taking them to pilot stages, building them into full-fledged programs and activities, watching them grow and, then begin to become stale, inventing or inviting crises, letting people walk through confusion, and using that chaotic space to dream new dreams.

This takes me back into the comments earlier about organizational change. We need to think very differently, but we will not implement those dreams if we are not prepared for the long walk of personal and organizational change.

The community experience incorporates a number of strands.

Capacity - Community associations are built upon the recognition of the fullness of each member because it is the sum of their capacities that represents the power of the group.

Collective Effort - It is obvious that the essence of community is people working together. One of the characteristics of this community work is shared responsibility that requires many talents. Thus, a person who has been labelled deficient can find a "hammock" of support in the collective capacities of a community that can shape itself to the unique character of each person.

Informality - Associational life in the community is a critical element of the informal economy. Here transactions of value take place without money, advertising, or hype. Authentic relationships are possible and care emerges in place of its packaged imitation: service. The informality of community is also expressed through relationships that are not managed. Communities viewed by those who only understand managed experiences and relationships appear to be disordered, messy, and inefficient. What these people fail to realize is that there is a hidden order to community groups that is determined by the need to incorporate capacity and fallibility.

Stories - In universities, people know through studies. In businesses and bureaucracies, people know by reports. In communities, people know by stories. These community stories allow people to reach back into their common history and their individual experience for knowledge about truth and direction for the future. Professionals and institutions often threaten the stories of community by urging community people to count up things rather than communicate. Successful community associations resist efforts to impose the foreign language of studies and reports because it is a tongue that ignores their capacities and insights.

Celebration - Community groups constantly incorporate celebrations, parties, and social events in their activities. The line between work and play is blurred, and the human nature of everyday life becomes part of the way of work.