

SYSTEMS FAILURE: WHY GOVERNMENTS MUST LEARN TO THINK DIFFERENTLY BY PROF JAKE CHAPMAN, DEMOS 2004

Summary by Valerie James

CHANGES IN SYSTEM COMPLEXITY:

- Increased communication technologies
- Increased communication between organisations
- More diverse range of orgs in public service, with less control by ministers
- Blurred boundaries: domestic/international policy, globalised communications, variables exponentially increased
- Policy outcome very difficult to predict, as system not straightforward & linear

HOW EXISTING SYSTEMS WILL FAIL

- Unintended consequences, alienated professionals, long term failure of overall system performance, ultimately a more cynical electorate.

SYSTEMS THEORIES

- Treats public services as complex adaptive systems, not rational linear ones.
- Has a 50 year history in operational research, cybernetics
- Is holistic – deals with complexity by increasing the level of abstraction, not dividing the problem into manageable, but separate, elements
- Best for dealing with “messes” – when no time, scope, resource boundaries or no clear agreement of what a solutions would even look like, let alone how it could be achieved

THE MECHANISIC LINEAR APPROACH

- Mechanical linear modes are excellent for understand the trajectory of throwing a rock, according to the laws of physics
- Best when “command and control” is an effective strategy and variables are low, and human systems are simple
- Can alienate people by treating them instrumentally

THE SYSTEM APPROACH

- Best able to predict the trajectory of a thrown bird – also subject to the same law of physics as the rock, but systems theory will accommodate adaptive behaviours
- Takes into account that there will be significantly different perspectives, based on different histories, cultures and goals. These perspectives must be integrated and accommodated if effective action is to be taken by all the relevant agents.
- Works best when:
 - Takes a range of actions
 - Evaluates the results
 - Subsequently learns what works best
- This means innovation (variety of actions) and effective feedback on the results of previous actions happens (i.e. there is a selections process).

SYSTEMS FAILURE: WHY GOVERNMENTS MUST LEARN TO THINK DIFFERENTLY BY PROF JAKE CHAPMAN, DEMOS 2004

GOVERNMENT OBSTACLES TO USING A SYSTEMS APPROACH

- Aversion to failure, exacerbated by the political process, which uses failures to score points rather than learn lessons
- Pressure for uniformity in public services
- Shared assumptions between civil servants and ministers that command and control is the correct way to exercise power. *continued...*
- Lack of evaluation of previous policies
- Lack of time to do anything other than cope with events
- Tradition of secrecy used to stifle feedback and learning
- Dominance of turf wars and negotiations between departments, effective making end-user performance secondary to other considerations
- The loss of professional integrity and autonomy under the knife of effective policy-making, and resistance and protections of vested interests by some professional and intermediary bodies.
- Learning about these obstacles is not prioritised.

SYSTEM PRACTICES

- Interventions would be ongoing and based on learning what works, rather than specifying targets to be met
- The priority would be to improve overall system performance, as judged by the end-users not just by ministers or civil servants
- The policy-making process would focus on the processes of improvement, rather than on the control of agencies involved.
- Engagement with agents and stakeholders would be based more upon listening and co-researching than on telling and instructing; responsibility for innovation and improvement would be widely distributed
- Implementation would deliberately foster innovation and include evaluation and reflections as part of the overall design.

AN IDEAL SYSTEMS POLICY STATEMENT WOULD INCLUDE:

Minimum specification with the following ingredients:

1. Clearly establish the direction of change
2. Set boundaries that cannot be crossed by any implementation strategy
3. Allocate resources, but without specifying how they should be used; these should include statement of timescale and potential further funding
4. Grant permissions – explicitly allow innovation
5. Specify core evaluation requirements in all cases based upon the experiences and outcomes of the end-uses of the system

PRIORITIES FOR GOVERNMENT

- Investigate public policy “messes” experimenting with systems methods
- Avoid marginalising the plethora of new strategy and innovation units across central government by finding new ways of working across existing departments, encouraging new ways of viewing existing problems.

SYSTEMS FAILURE: WHY GOVERNMENTS MUST LEARN TO THINK DIFFERENTLY BY PROF JAKE CHAPMAN, DEMOS 2004

- Scale up systems approaches – building them into career development and training for policy-makers and other public servants, making them a priority.
- Don't wait till the old vanguard dies off and existing modes are proved beyond doubt, through direct experience, to be failing (as has happened in dominant science paradigm shifts). This would mean public policy fails catastrophically.