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## Performance Management in the Voluntary Sector - responding to complexity

### New Public Management approaches to Performance Management in the Voluntary Sector.

New Public Management (NPM) has been the dominant force in public-sector Performance Management (PM) for past 30 years (van Thiel and Leeuw 2002; Ferlie et al 2006). Its history is well-charted, and so we will give only the briefest description here. NPM has been characterised as ‘three Ms’: Markets, Managers and Measurement (Ferlie et al. 1996)

- Markets – the creation of markets for social interventions helps to drive innovation and efficiency
- Managers – social interventions must be overseen by people with training in professional management practice. Managers’ role is to identify what success looks like (strategic management) and to hold subordinates accountable for the delivery of that success through Performance Management.
- Measurement – Metrics must be created which identify what success and failure look like, and performance must be measured against these metrics.

The roots of NPM lie in ‘Public Choice Theory’ (Buchanan and Tullock 1962). Public Choice Theory argued that the intrinsic motivation of those who undertake social interventions cannot be trusted to produce effective and efficient public services. Instead those who undertake social interventions must be extrinsically motivated – through the incentives created by market forces, and through the use of performance targets. Managers in such units are held accountable for the achievement of established performance targets by their seniors; in turn those managers, hold their own staff accountable.

The exemplar of this approach in action is often seen as the Public Service Agreements (PSAs) created by the New Labour Government in 1998 in which 600 separate targets for public services were created (Panchamia and Thomas 2014). One of the most famous examples of a PSA was “98% of patients treated or admitted within 4 hours”. The purpose of these targets was to identify key areas of performance and set measurable performance expectations, which would focus the minds of staff and managers on achieving improvements.

“As one official explained [concerning PSAs] , it was clear that the Government cared about certain issues, such as health waiting times or school standards, which meant that, even if ministers came and went, the department nonetheless continued to know where to focus attention and resources. Essentially, the PSA machinery provided a ‘guiding star to the policy direction of the whole government’.” (Panchamia and Thomas 2014: 12).

Over time, targets for public service outputs (for example, numbers of training courses delivered) were replaced by targets for outcomes (for example, numbers of unemployed people who found employment as a result of undertaking training courses) (Panchamia and Thomas 2014). This reflected a general trend in NPM which shifted the accountability focus in public services from outputs to “results” (Perrin 2006, Mayne 2007). This shift occurred because there was an increasing realisation that output-based targets could lead to a focus on undertaking activity which did not lead

to benefit for clients, and which often distorted the effective delivery of services (van Thiel, and Leeuw 2002). This evolution of NPM is known as “Outcome-Based Performance Management” (OBPM) (Lowe 2013 Lowe and Wilson 2015).

As delivery of public services has been increasingly outsourced from direct public sector delivery to external organisations commissioned and contracted by public sector bodies, the voluntary sector has played an growing role in delivering specified public services (Davies 2011). This was part of a changing relationship between state and voluntary sector in which contracts for specified types and levels of service provision replaced general grants to cover organisational costs and mission delivery. In 2000/1, the state gave £4.6 billion to UK voluntary organisations in the form of grants, with £4.5 billion given in the form of contracts. By 2010/11, this had changed to £3 billion grants and £11.2 billion contracts (NCVO 2013).

The purpose of this change can be seen to give greater control to the Government over the types of activity they were funding, as it brought the voluntary sector within the PM regimes favoured by the state. The UK Government, in particular, sought to spread NPM, and especially OBPM practice, to the voluntary sector. This was enacted through central Government commissioning practice and guidance to other commissioners at local and national level (Cabinet Office 2011). An example of this can be seen in the increasing use of Payment by Results commissioning practice for Government programmes such as the Work Programme (Department of Work and Pensions 2012) and Transforming Rehabilitation (Ministry of Justice 2013). Payment by Results is the purest form of OBPM, as delivery organisations only receive payment if they achieve certain pre-defined outcome measures.

The use of Payment by Results, and other forms of OBPM, represented good practice from a NPM perspective. Governments were able to specify the outcomes they wanted to achieve (for example, increasing employment rates amongst the long-term unemployed) and translate these into performance metrics by which they it could assess the performance of organisations they had contracted to deliver (e.g. numbers of previously unemployed people who found a job and retained it for six months). This is exactly the relationship between strategic management (i.e. the process of setting desired outcomes) and performance management that was recommended at this point in time, from within the NPM approach (Poister 2010).

The UK Cabinet Office has also partnered with Universities to support and encourage the take-up of OBPM. In partnership with the Blavatnik School of Government at Oxford University, the Cabinet Office has created the “Government Outcomes Lab” (GO Lab). This purpose of this Lab is described in the following way:

“Social Impact Bonds (SIBs)<sup>1</sup> and Outcomes-Based commissioning (OBC) have emerged as innovative ways for governments to achieve better social outcomes through collaboration with the private and not-for-profit sectors. One of the objectives of the GO Lab is to develop world-leading research about when these work and when they don’t, as well as providing practical support to local commissioners.” (Oxford University 2016)

In addition to the OBPM mechanisms embedded in Government commissioning practice, take up of the OBPM approach was enabled and encouraged by think-tanks who have championed the approach, and offered skills development consultancy to help voluntary organisations undertake it.

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<sup>1</sup> SIBs are a specialised form of Payment by Results contract in which a private investor provides working capital for the intervention, which is then paid back to the investor (usually with a small profit) by the public sector if particular “outcomes” are achieved.

For example, a range of think-tanks and voluntary sector representative bodies created the “Inspiring Impact” programme. Its stated mission is

“working towards a world where high quality impact measurement is the norm in the non-profit sector. Our vision is that in 2022:

- The majority of charities and social enterprises routinely plan, measure, assess, and improve their work on the basis of their impact.
- The majority of funders seek to increase their impact by using impact data to allocate resources and improve practices.
- Evidence about effective interventions is widely available and regularly used to inform policy and practice.
- Effective interventions are widespread leading to significant and sustainable improvements to the lives of tens of thousands of vulnerable people.” (Inspiring Impact 2017)

New Philanthropy Capital (NPC) has been an undoubted leader in this respect. It offered platforms to Ministers to promote Payment by Results to the sector (NPC 2012), created reports on the uptake of impact measurement by the voluntary sector (Ógáin, Lumley and Pritchard 2012) and has produced a range of blogs and events which seek to build voluntary sector organisations capacity to engage with OBPM (See, for example NPC 2013).

Grant-giving organisations, including charitable foundations have also played a role in promoting the uptake of OBPM within the voluntary sector. They have done so directly through their own funding practice. The Big Lottery Fund, for example, has previously described itself by saying “we are an outcomes funder” (Big Lottery Fund 2009) and have created grant giving programmes explicitly designed to promote outcomes-based commissioning, such as the “Commissioning Better Outcomes Fund” (Big Lottery Fund 2014). Foundations such as the Oak Foundation have produced ‘how-to’ guides for commissioners and delivery organisations to operationalise Payment by Results (see for example Webster 2016).

The “outcomes-oriented” or “strategic funding” movement (Brest 2012) provides reference points for OBPM practice amongst charitable foundations:

““Outcome-oriented” is synonymous with “result-oriented,” “strategic,” and “effective.” It refers to philanthropy where donors seek to achieve clearly defined goals; where they and their grantees pursue evidence-based strategies for achieving those goals; and where both parties monitor progress toward outcomes and assess their success in achieving them in order to make appropriate course corrections.” (Brest 2012)

### Voluntary Sector Response to OBPM

However, evidence indicates that voluntary sector enactment of OBPM approaches has always been patchy, at best. Some larger voluntary sector organisations, such as Barnardos, have embraced it (McEwen, Shoesmith and Allen 2010) but many, whilst performance-managed through OBPM mechanisms in their Government contracts, have not used such PM arrangements internally for their of own staff. Instead they have viewed OBPM as monitoring arrangements imposed to satisfy the needs of funders (Moxham and Boaden 2007).

Furthermore, where OBPM practices have been instigated by large charities, studies have shown a discrepancy in experience between front line practitioners and managers. Whilst managers view

OBPM as a useful mechanism to demonstrate their worth to funders, frontline practitioners view it as interfering with their practice:

“Front-line staff felt that it was often inappropriate to have time-consuming benchmarking very early on in the service. They also felt that it hindered the building of trust in the client-worker relationship. Another issue where evaluation was seen as inappropriate was when a client situation was critical, such as with emergency first aid.” (Green 2013)

#### Resistance to OBPM – poor practice or ahead of the curve?

There are two potential responses to the patchiness of voluntary sector engagement with OBPM, and the resistance of some staff and organisations to implementing it. The first response is to view a lack of engagement with OBPM simply as poor practice, which can be countered with a mixture of carrots and sticks designed to encourage management practice within the voluntary sector in this direction.

This response can be seen in the creation and promotion of tools such as the “Measuring Up!” tool, created by the Inspiring Impact programme. It “helps organisations to work out how they’re doing against good impact practice” (Inspiring Impact 2014). If your organisation doesn’t ‘measure up’ then the clear message is that you should improve your practice. Governments have sought to encourage ‘better practice’ amongst the voluntary sector in this respect. For example, the UK Government used its leadership of the G8 in 2014 to promote the virtue of ‘Measuring Impact’ to the social investment and philanthropy sectors. It called on the sector to:

1. Embrace “impact accountability” as a common value that lies at the heart of all impact investments
2. Apply measurement best practices across impact portfolios, deals, and investee organizations
3. Establish an “impact language” and data infrastructure that enables the application of these practices
4. Evolve the field through continued learning and the advancement of a shared impact measurement agenda” (Impact Measurement Working Group 2014, p. 1)

However, there is an alternative way of viewing voluntary sector resistance to OBPM practice. This involves seeing it as resistance to a form of PM which is inappropriate for the complexity of the work that many voluntary sector organisations undertake. For example, in their critique of “strategic funding” by philanthropists, Hartnell, Hodgson and Knight (2014) argue that:

“Many have welcomed the admission by some of the prime architects of the strategic philanthropy approach that its rather cut-and-dried approach – clear goals, data-driven strategies, heightened accountability and rigorous evaluations – doesn’t fit the complexities of social change. FSG consultants Kania, Kramer and Russell now suggest moving away from a ‘rigid and predictive model of strategy’ to ‘emergent strategic philanthropy’. The reason for the change, they suggest, is that strategic philanthropy doesn’t work for complex problems because you can’t spot the necessary causative links leading to social change and therefore you can’t plan for them. Strategic philanthropy works fine for simple problems (building a hospital) and for complicated problems (developing a vaccine) but not for complex problems (improving the health of a particular group in the population) because you can’t see the links in the chain.” (Hartnell, Hodgson and Knight 2014)

We will explore now this second viewpoint.

### OBPM and the failure to respond to complexity

There is an increasing acceptance in the field of public management that it is useful to view public management through the lens of complexity, as the kind of challenges and response systems which public management grapples with have the characteristics of complex systems (Bovaird 2008). Mowles (2014) suggests that “social interventions are ‘complex systems thrust amid complex systems’”.

It is possible to identify what it means to view the PM of social interventions through the lens of complexity, and thus what a complexity-friendly perspective requires from the PM of social interventions. Lowe and Wilson (2016) argue that a complexity-friendly perspective on the PM of social requires:

1. Rejecting linear notions of cause and effect

The ‘results’ produced by complex systems are emergent and cannot be reliably traced back to single ‘causes’, or even combinations of causes. It is impossible to produce reliable counter-factual scenarios in complex systems, because complex systems do not behave in the same way twice, even with seemingly identical starting conditions. It is thus impossible to attribute results to particular interventions within such a system, and so PM cannot hold actors accountable for producing results which are beyond their control.

2. The use of detailed, contextual knowledge to make effective judgements

Because the results produced by complex systems are so susceptible to small variations, in order to make effective judgements about what is occurring within complex systems, and how actors should respond within them, it is necessary for those actors to understand the detail of the particular contexts in which they are operating, and the particular histories which led to the current position. PM must therefore enable actors to use detailed, rich information to inform judgements about performance, and how to improve it, and cannot form meaningful comparisons across different contexts (in both time and place).

3. The ability to respond and adapt to emergent change in a timely fashion, including to change agreed goals

Complex systems are unpredictable. The emergent nature of the patterns of they produce mean that it is exceptionally difficult to predict how they will behave in the future. This means that it is difficult to set meaningful long-term strategic goals (as what counts as success may change) and impossible to translate those strategic goals into performance measures which necessarily remain relevant during periods of dynamic change. PM must allow actors continually to redefine their objectives (as new opportunities may arise, or a changed context render previous goals obsolete) and must similarly enable measurements of success to adapt.

4. Being humble about the status of information we are able to collect about a situation

Working within complex systems require us to take a humble position with regard to the ‘knowledge’ we have about how such systems operate. Our knowledge of any situation, even with the most diligent research, will be partial and incomplete. Given that even minute variations in the starting positions of complex systems can lead to huge variations in the results they produce, this

lack of full knowledge means it is impossible to be certain about how such systems will behave. PM must therefore be humble in its deployment of knowledge, and should not create significant consequences for actors based on such partial indicators.

When we look at OBPM as a PM mechanism, we can see that it fails to respond to these requirements:

- It seeks to attribute results to particular interventions within complex systems - for example Payment by Results mechanisms must attribute 'results' to a particular organisation or programme, in order to know who it should pay (thus violating requirement 1).
- It uses abstracted, simplified information on which to make performance judgements – it requires the use of 'cost-effective' proxy measures in order to make the practice of performance measurement possible within a sensible resource-limit (Friedman 2001) (thus violating requirement 2)
- It fixes desired outcomes in advance, and makes these part of contractual arrangements – for example, Payment by Results mechanisms must specify desired outcomes, and the means by which they are to be measured, in order to create viable contracts (thus violating requirement 3)
- It takes decisions with significant implications for actors (like whether an organisation gets paid or not) on the basis of simplified information, which cannot be reconciled with complex reality (thus violating requirement 4)

The ways in which it is argued that OBPM fails to respond to the requirements of complexity, such as those outlined above, are exactly echoed by wider concerns within PM literature about the metrics-based approach to PM as a whole, and how that approach responds to complexity. Within Performance Management literature, significant concern has emerged amongst academics and senior private sector managers that metrics-based PM does not enable organisations to respond to the increased uncertainty of complex operating environments (Melnyka et al 2014).

The consequences of OBPM's inability to respond to complexity are very serious. Lowe and Wilson 2015 argue that OBPM is unable to respond to the complex reality of social problems and the complex systems which engage with them, and thus turns the management of social interventions into a game, the object of which is to produce good looking data. In other words, because OBPM seeks to turn complex real-life outcomes into a series of simple metrics, it shifts the focus of management from making reality better to simply improving our score. For Lowe and Wilson (2015), the rules of this game encourage the use of management tactics which do not promote genuine performance improvement. Instead, the rules of the game favour 'gamesmanship' tactics which promote appearance of doing the job well (what has previously been referred to as 'gaming'). These tactics divert energy and resources into wasteful, costly activity which does not benefit clients, and undermines professional judgement.

### [Towards a complexity-friendly PM for the voluntary sector](#)

Some evolution towards a more complexity-friendly set of PM ideas has occurred over the past few years. For example, the shift in Public Management academic discourse from PM to Performance Governance (PG) is built on the recognition that social interventions often involve multiple stakeholders, including both citizens themselves, and a range of private and voluntary sector organisations. (Halligan, Sarrico and Rhodes 2012; Conaty 2012) As a result, new concepts of Performance Governance, and in particular shared accountability, have developed. This literature, also reflected in the 'Collective Impact' movement (FSG 2015), suggests that multiple stakeholders should be held collectively accountable for producing desired outcomes.

However, making multiple organizations responsible for producing outcomes does not seem to have solved the fundamental problems identified with OBPM mechanisms, as the range of factors which contribute to the emergence of outcomes are still beyond the control of any of the organisations which can be held collectively accountable. The problems that PG experiences with understanding how to respond to the shared accountability for outcomes are captured in Conaty's (2012: 304) remark that the nature of such outcomes is "uncontrollable and unmanageable".

The preceding discussion suggests that accepting the shared nature of outcomes is necessary but not sufficient in terms of creating a complexity-friendly PM approach which would enable social interventions to perform better. A more radical shift in perspective would be necessary.

To achieve such a shift in perspective, we must first rethink the purpose of PM in situations of complexity and focus PM's attention on learning and improvement. The PM of social interventions in complex systems must be concerned with the question: 'how can we help people to do the right job, well?' (Lowe and Wilson 2016). In any genuinely complex situation, actors will be faced with making repeated decisions and judgement-calls concerning issues where they cannot know for certain what the appropriate course of action should be because of the intrinsic limits on what is knowable about the future behaviour of those systems.

For example, a substance misuse worker is faced with a client who says that they are not using drugs, but the worker suspects that they are lying. What should the worker do? Challenge the client, or accept the suspected lie in order to build a stronger relationship with that client, which would enable greater challenge further down the line? There is no a priori right answer to this question, as what happens will be different between different clients and for the same client at different points in time (depending on the client's mood and their immediate context, some days it would be appropriate to challenge, some days not).

The purpose of this micro-level PM example is to highlight that it is not appropriate to think of the function of PM as being to hold the worker (or organisation) accountable for what happens as a result of particular decisions (because what happens as a result of that particular decision is uncertain). Instead, the function of PM should be to build the worker's capacity to make good judgements in situations of uncertainty and complexity. It is at the micro-scale which PM can usefully intervene, supporting the process of judgement-making.

This aligns with Complex Adaptive systems approaches, which suggest that in order to enable positive adaptation in complex systems, our strategy should be to build the adaptive capacity of the lowest level organisational units (French 2015).

We can explore examples of how the capacity for making judgements in situations of uncertainty, might be developed. Two aspects of this which have been explored through practical experimentation are:

- Developing a "positive error culture" (Gigerenzer 2014) – a culture of collective reflection on mistakes and uncertainty which helps to create effective feedback loops for learning
- Horizontal accountability (Gibbon 2013) - a peer to peer version of accountability, in which workers account for the quality of their practice to their colleagues, ensuring that those asking questions have the detailed understanding of practice required to support judgement-making

The author has undertaken action-research experiments which explore whether it is possible to create a positive error culture with horizontal accountability amongst a new voluntary sector

delivery partnership, and what the impact of these are on the practice of the staff involved. The research was undertaken in partnership with voluntary sector organisations in the North East of England, as part of the Big Lottery Fund's Fulfilling Lives programme, "a strategic programme" designed to create system-change for adults with complex needs. As part of action-research with the Fulfilling Lives programme in Newcastle and Gateshead, the organisations involved created a Learning Community – a space for practitioners to provide an account of their practice to one another, and to create a positive error culture around their discussion of practice (Lowe, Wilson and Boobis 2016).

This research demonstrated that it is possible to create a positive error culture amongst practitioners working in complex, multi-partner programmes, and that the Learning Community approach did improve people's capacity for judgement-making in situations of uncertainty (Lowe, Wilson and Boobis 2016).

### Enabling learning: The Strategic Context

We can build on this research to begin to ask questions about the macro-scale context in which such an approach to learning functions effectively. Bowman and Pavlov (2014) argue that it is necessary to rethink the purpose of strategic management (the macro-scale) in order to create the conditions under which front line staff can respond effectively to complexity. They argue that strategic management must shift its purpose from goal-setting to one which promotes and supports the capacity of the frontline to innovate.

If we apply Bowman and Pavlov's argument about strategic management to this context, we can create an argument which suggests that for a micro-scale, complexity-friendly PM approach to succeed, it must be matched by complexity-friendly PM arrangements which are embedded in grant-making and commissioning.

Interestingly, we can begin to see such complexity-funding and commissioning practices emerging. Davidson-Knight and Lowe (2017) have undertaken research which explores the experiences of, and responses to, complexity amongst a set of funders and commissioners who are interested in the challenge of complexity. This research has shown that funders who are seeking to respond effectively to complexity deploy the following funding and commissioning approaches, in different combinations:

- Take responsibility for the health of the systems they are working within by investing in network infrastructure which enables actors to communicate, and the development of positive, trusting relationships between actors in the system
- They do not ask the organisations they fund to demonstrate their impact – instead they focus evaluation resource on learning and improvement, creating learning systems (mechanisms for reflective practice) and positive error cultures
- They assume that the people and organisations they support are intrinsically motivated to perform well, and do not require extrinsic motivation (i.e. financial rewards for good performance, or punishments for poor performance)

The key conceptual shift identified by these funders in the research is a move from a default situation of mistrust of the motivations of organisations delivering the work (and therefore a presumption that such organisations must be extrinsically motivated through rewards and punishments in order to do a good job) to a position of trust that the people and organisations they fund are intrinsically motivated to do a good job, and that what they require is support to do this job well. This shift in the default position regarding motivation enables a complexity-friendly approach

to function by moving the vertical accountability focus from 'outcomes' to basic areas such as financial transparency. Furthermore, this approach to motivation fits much better with what is known about the motivation of people to undertake this form of work. Experimental psychology strongly indicates that people are intrinsically motivated to perform non-routine work, and that seeking to extrinsically motivate people through contingent reward and punishment reduces their intrinsic motivation, rather than adding to it (Pink 2009).

### Better outcomes through improved systems

XXX5 argue that it is possible to see the response to complexity of such funders and commissioners as the emergence of a new complexity-friendly paradigm in the funding and commissioning (and therefore PM) of social interventions. At a macro-scale, this paradigm focuses on PM as a mechanism to achieve system-change through learning and adaptation. We enable systems to produce better emergent outcomes by enabling the actors within them to create the learning feedback loops that drive conscious adaptation. Therefore, a new paradigm does not abandon the quest for better outcomes. Rather it suggests that the way to achieve real improvement in outcomes is to enable the system to learn, improve and adapt.

### Saving the babies, not the bathwater

These questions also provide a way to integrate the valuable aspects of the 'impact' agenda into a new PM paradigm. The problem with understanding impact is not the measurement of it, but the use of that measurement for PM purposes. When impact is used for accountability purposes (as in the old paradigm of PM) it is a clear violation of Campbell's Law:

"The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor." (Campbell 1976)

This law exactly predicts the gaming processes which OBPM has generated. What is needed, therefore is impact measurement which is used for learning and improvement, not for accountability. Such an approach could ask 'How does an organisation learn about its impact within systems which produce desired outcomes?' The methodological advancements made by those who have sought to measure impact are thus useful, particularly in the area of shared impact, in that they help to produce measures which form part of such a reflective process.

### Conclusion

We have traced the way in which OBPM became the dominant paradigm for PM for voluntary organisations, and have seen both the adoption of this approach, and the resistance to it which resulted.

We have offered a view which legitimates resistance to OBPM, because the approach fails to respond to the complex nature of the social interventions which are the norm for voluntary sector organisations.

To do this, we must bring lessons from complexity theory into PM. This requires a new paradigm for PM of social interventions, one which trusts the motivations of those who do the work, and which takes as its core purpose that it should seek to enable those people to make better judgements in situations of uncertainty. We have provided examples of elements of what such a paradigm might look like in practice, and finally we have shown how this might also embrace the valuable insights and practices which the 'impact' agenda has created.

The world of the voluntary sector is intrinsically complex, because real people are complex and the outcomes we seek are emergent properties of complex systems. As managers, we do those people a disservice by pretending it's simple. We need to create the conditions where we can reflect on the complexity of practice authentically. In this way, we create the feedback loops by which practice improves, systems change and adapt for the better, and we achieve real impact in people's lives.

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