Let's provide something useful for a change. Let's provide knowledge to change

Sacred Cows

Not so long ago I attended a meeting with a number of middle-tier managers. Most had just returned from a residential training programme in the Lake District meant to equip them with various management tools to improve the way they work together. In their time away they had been introduced to the notion of 'sacred cows', those ideas and practices that have become untouchable in our organisations, beyond criticism, but which it might be enlightening and productive to challenge. To illustrate this, for the benefit of the few of us who hadn't been part of the programme, they used an example they all clearly recognised - public consultation!

At this point they had my full attention. And I have to say I bridled a little. But once my defensiveness had waned, I could see that their viewpoint was the predictable outcome of a number of trends that I, and probably many of you, will recognise all too well. And their view makes perfect sense. Indeed, I think I share it. Using a systems thinking approach, derived from the writings of Dr. W. Edwards Deming and the more recent work of John Seddon, I shall endeavour to show you why.

Compliance

Public consultation and research (I won't get into definitions here of where one begins and the other ends) is now very much caught up in the compliance culture that pervades local government today. This culture is a logical consequence of the dominant management approach, both in the public and private sectors, which is to say 'command and control'.

Command and control management is typified by top down hierarchies and rigid departmental silos. Legislation, policy and procedures are used to 'push' organisations and people to go in prescribed directions, often with the imposition of centrally imposed arbitrary numerical targets. The approach can deliver short-term gains, but usually with unexpected negative consequences and always at the expense of long term, sustainable improvement. And when things go wrong, individuals, not the wider system, tend to get the blame. That is, if they haven't 'cheated' and covered up their so called 'failure' from senior management, politicians or auditors. [i]

In such a system, fear and blame are commonplace and it is hardly surprising that compliance is a common tactic. Avoidance of negative consequences is the name of the game. And taking risks, whether in the form of full blown innovation or simply following a course of action that might just be to the detriment of a government indicator, is a major casualty. Learning, which often relies on making mistakes, subsequently suffers as well. Workers at all levels learn instead to follow instruction and do as they are told to avoid the risk of blame.

As researchers, we should be considering not only the implications of this approach for our work but also how we actively contribute to its maintenance. The recent round of BVPI surveys are a case in point.

The BVPI general survey

On the face of it, the BVPI general survey of residents covers a wide range of subjects. It provides 'satisfaction' opinion data on services such as street cleaning, waste collection, recycling, buses and bus transport information. It also asks about overall satisfaction with the council and departments, making complaints, public opinion on whether things are getting better or worse, quality of life and anti-social behaviour.

Let's look at satisfaction with services. Imagine if, rather than email the results from the general survey in a detailed fully interpretive report to councillors, directors, assistant directors and heads of service, we took them direct to the managers responsible for individual services to share them with them. The exchange might go something like this:

Researcher: Here are the results for your service from the latest BVPI general survey.

Service manager: Thanks. How did we do? Are they better than last time?

Researcher: Most of them were up three or four percentage points. And where they fell the decreases were not statistically significant.

Service manager: (visibly relaxing) Oh, good. That's a relief. We have had some problems recently, a few high profile cock-ups. This should keep the top dogs off my back for a while. I'd better make sure that I don't come across as complacent though (winks). How did we do compared with others? What's the national average?

Researcher: I am afraid I don't know yet. The figures aren't available for quite a while yet. Will that be a problem for you?

Service manager: No, not really. It'll only cause me grief if other authorities have improved more than us. Though you can always argue that the best ones have bigger budgets than we do - might even get more money out of it (winks again).

Researcher: What will you do with the results?

Service manager: Well last time we included them in our end of year performance management report. But only in an annex, we didn't want to draw attention to them since we didn't think councillors would think they were good enough.

Researcher: No, I meant what will you change as a consequence? You know, what improvements do you think you will make now?

Service manager: (after a moments silence) I don't know, what would you suggest? I am sure I could come up with something if I had to. It all seems to be going pretty well anyway ...

Unlikely. Unfair. I am not so sure. Whether we support the survey or not, it might make us uncomfortable for I suspect it is not just the findings of the statutory BVPI surveys that would meet with this kind of response.

Think about it. In the New Year every local authority will have data showing how their services are perceived, which in turn will be passed on to central government. But what use is that? Yes, local authorities will have data, which they can compare with the last time they did the survey and which can be compared with other authorities. But to what end? Does this really constitute 'knowledge'? And does anything ever change as a direct result?

Purpose

It's a question of purpose. If you visit service managers with the results from the BVPI general survey and ask them about their plans to improve their services using the results, they'll be hard pushed to answer. How could they? It hasn't told them anything they can realistically use to improve their knowledge of the way things work in the eyes of the customer. That's not what it was designed to do. It is not its purpose.

Rather than help service managers understand their customer better, giving them genuine knowledge about their needs and concerns, surveys like the BVPI general survey measure how the public say they feel about things that others, at some distance from the work, have decided are important. If things appear to be going well, that's great. When the figures fall (and, like shares, an understanding of variation tells us that even in stable situations figures go up and down within predictable limits), they send a bad message up the hierarchy often bringing unwanted senior management attention.

Even where the government's researchers have required us to ask supplementary questions, such as those on the frequency of buses, or the reliability of bin collections, or the cleanliness of streets after recycling collections, what do we realistically expect managers to do with the results? At best they will suggest further avenues of inquiry, like 'which bus routes are actually busiest and suffer overcrowding?' or 'how many bins are we failing to empty and on which rounds?' But in a great many instances what we have been forced to ask addresses aspects of service that we might reasonably expect managers to be continually seeking to improve anyway, like reliability and cleanliness. Such things are surely worth pursuing even if most customers are currently 'satisfied'. In the private sector, where there is competition and the ultimate risk that you might go out of business, satisfied customers are often happy to move on and be satisfied using someone else's service.

So, if we are not about this kind of measuring and monitoring, then what is the purpose of research?

Information versus knowledge?

W. Edwards Deming said: "information is not knowledge. Let's not confuse the two." He was clear: "There is no knowledge without theory." By theory he meant, what's our question? What do we think might explain the behaviour or events that we have observed in a given situation? What's our hunch or best guess that we wish to test? The problem with the BVPI surveys is there is no theory behind them. They are a symptom of command and control thinking. The individual questions may be technically competent (I am sure some would argue with this, though they'd be missing the point), but the overall question still remains: why are we asking them? What do we really hope to understand better and expect to be able to change as a consequence?

Research is not an end in itself, it is a means to an end. If we understand work as a system [ii] then we understand that it has a purpose (to clean streets, transport people, remove their household waste). This is as true for public services as it is in manufacturing. Crucially, for optimal performance, the outputs from any part of a system must meet the input requirements of the next stages. As researchers, we must develop our appreciation of work as a system. That means thinking about who will use our work (the output) and asking, what can they do as a result of what you give them? Are you giving them things they don't need - can't use? Could you give them something else or extra so they can do a better job themselves?

Remember the middle tier managers at the start of this piece? Talking with them revealed that research and public consultation had become something you do because you have to do it. Too often it wasn't aligned with their work, or more accurately their purpose. As far as they were concerned it added little or no value, yet it cost them in both time and money and sometimes it brought down on them disapproval from the higher reaches of the organisation. Certainly a sacred cow worthy of challenge.

A better way

Research adds value when it enables those on the inside of the system to hear the 'voice of the customer'. Seddon argues that too many managers view research as a 'professional' activity conducted by specialists. Whereas, he feels it is better used as a 'relationship activity' enabling those who do the work of direct service delivery to know what matters to customers and build strong relationships [iii]. This is no small thing. Deming was very clear that without an outside view of the organisation those working on the inside cannot learn a better way: "Their best efforts and hard work only dig deeper the pit that they are working in. [iv]

If as researchers we work closely with those doing the work then we can align ourselves with their purpose in order to help them gain insights that they can use to improve. The better we understand their work the greater the likelihood we will provide outputs that will form valuable inputs for them. No more reports on shelves, no more wasted effort.

Imagine, instead, more exchanges like this:

Researcher: I have got the results back from the quick survey we did for you. As agreed, we just did a small sample in the streets where you have been piloting your new approach.

Service manager: Great. So what is going on? Our performance data is still dropping, it's been below average on eight occasions now, that's more than just normal variation. But there's no discernible change to the calls we are getting on our hotline, so I just don't know what's going on out there. Does the survey confirm our hunch?

Researcher: Yes, I think it does. But it also shows that customers don't share your view on that change you introduced last month, which could also be contributing to the fall in performance. I know it worked for you in operational terms, but it seems to be confusing some of your customers.

Service manager: Right, that's good to know. I'll get the team together to discuss whether we can get the same benefit without this impact on the way things work. Before you go, there's another issue that's perplexing me. I've got some ideas, but I need your help to find out for sure.

A final thought

Seddon suggests that we can test how customer focused our organisations really are by asking two questions: "How much money do we spend on customer research?" and "What actions for improvement are taken as a consequence?" I don't know how much money local government has spent on carrying out the BVPI general survey. Based on what we spent in York, it could be anything up to and beyond £2m. Certainly a huge sum in most people's minds. And I am confident, though unhappy to say, that if every council set out to objectively assess in some months time what improvements have been taken as a consequence the return on that investment would be shamefully small. But we should not look to blame service managers. Instead we should endeavour to improve the way we provide them with the knowledge they need to make a difference for the people who really matter, the people that use our services.

References

i) Those interested in cover-ups should look at the recent Select Committee report, 'On Target? Government by Measurement'. The pity being that the authors still believe targets can be made to work.

ii) See page four of W. Edwards Deming's book 'Out of the Crisis', 1986, for his diagram of production viewed as a system, or visit http://www.deming.ch/downloads/deming_speech_en.pdf where it appears on page two. Deming regarded this simple yet profound diagram, shown first to the Japanese in 1950, as the most important diagram he ever drew in his life.

iii) 'Freedom from Command and Control: A Better Way to Make the Work Work', John Seddon, 2003.

iv) 'The New Economics for Industry, Education, Government', W. Edwards Deming, 1994

About the author: David Allen has for several years successfully led the widely recognised research function at City of York Council. He now brings this experience to his work with organisations as a freelance consultant helping them design the best research, consultation and other feedback processes for the ultimate purpose of delivering better services to their customers. For the last couple of years, David served as an elected member of the LARIA Council.