Collaboration For Good

"Exploring the opportunities that may exist in our city for collaborative partnerships between the public, private and voluntary sectors for the benefit of the community"

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in partnership with Ai Change Management

Introduction

Peter Lawrence, Director of Ai Change Management, who are Organisation Development Practitioners in the city of Liverpool, invited me to research this question.

"Exploring the opportunities that may exist in our city for collaborative partnerships between the public, private and voluntary sectors for the benefit of the community"

The research question was prompted by the story told in the film, I Daniel Blake, of people who needed help which the system failed to provide, with tragic consequences. Rather than look to those outside of our city system, what can we do for ourselves to improve the lives of those in our community?

It is not new news that Liverpool has issues much like many other cities. This enquiry raises the issues from the perspective of people at the heart of the system.

To provide context for my enquiry, I focused on the education system, although the learning is capable of being applied across all sectors and communities.

Having spoken to 12 individuals in the voluntary, public and private sectors across the city region; I have begun to understand why our system is currently not benefitting the citizen as much as it could.

Whilst the conversation needs to continue, we have made a start.

The word cloud I have created which heads my report, highlights the positives of **opportunity, community benefit** and **potential growth** that can be achieved by creating a system that enables strong **collaborations** and **partnerships.** There are also negatives such as the system being perceived as **fractured, confusing** and **challenging.**

If we can confront the identified issues, we could be better equipped to create a system that benefits individuals, businesses and the plethora of public sector organisations in Liverpool. My conversations evidenced a consensus and recognition that change is needed.

The challenge is who will **champion** the changes and how a coordinated approach can be achieved. My research will focus on the key perceived issues and themes which can form part of the foundations for further research and actions.

Systems Thinking

My research is built upon the foundation of systems thinking, and we need to understand what a multifaceted system is. To help us understand how multifaceted, complex and complicated systems work, Professor Ladyman at the University of Bristol uses the metaphor of a flock of birds flying towards a skyscraper. As the birds approach the skyscraper they split then merge and reform at the other end.

> *"Each bird follows a simple set of rules that influence its actions and consequently the interactions between the community of birds"*

There is no predetermined group plan to form as a flock. Instead, **each bird follows a simple set of rules that influence its actions and consequently the interactions between the community of birds**. The "flock-like behaviour" is the result of momentary interactions. This applies to any system with multiple interconnected components (Ladyman, n.d.)

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

To provide a focus for my research and enable future exploration, I have chosen five key themes which were identified based on the frequency of the word being used.

Complex

"a system of different things that are linked in a complicated way" (Oxford University Press, 2020)

With the system being viewed as complex it is important to investigate why that is the case. There is an interesting article in the Harvard Business Review magazine called "Learning to Live with

> *"Reducing the complexity of the system will have tangible positive effects"*

Complexity" whereby it is stated that there are three properties that determine the complexity of an environment. They are,

1. multiplicity (number of interacting elements),
2. interdependence (how connected those elements are) and
3. diversity (degree of their heterogeneity) (Sargut & McGrath, 2011).

As the system in Liverpool ostensibly has high multiplicity, interdependence and diversity the system is classed as highly complex. Complexity can cause issues such as reduced returns and higher costs. Research by McKinsey found companies reporting lower levels of complexity (easier to get things done) had the highest returns on employed and invested capital. Additionally, four out of five organisations that reduce complexity reduce their costs (saving as much as 20% on personnel costs) (Heywood, et al., 2010). Therefore, reducing the complexity of the system will have tangible positive effects for the organisations involved. One issue with complex systems is it is difficult to make sense of them. Our brains are incredible at pattern-matching but unfortunately, this is limited to known patterns and complexity challenges this (Hardison, 2019). Therefore, finding solutions to complexity can be difficult.

The following model shows how some complexity is needed to cultivate innovation and creativity. However, too much chaos/complexity reduces the predictability of outcomes and the agreement about what to do which can be harmful for growth.

Figure 1: Simple, complex and chaotic spaces: An adaptation of the Stacey Certainty/Agreement Matrix.
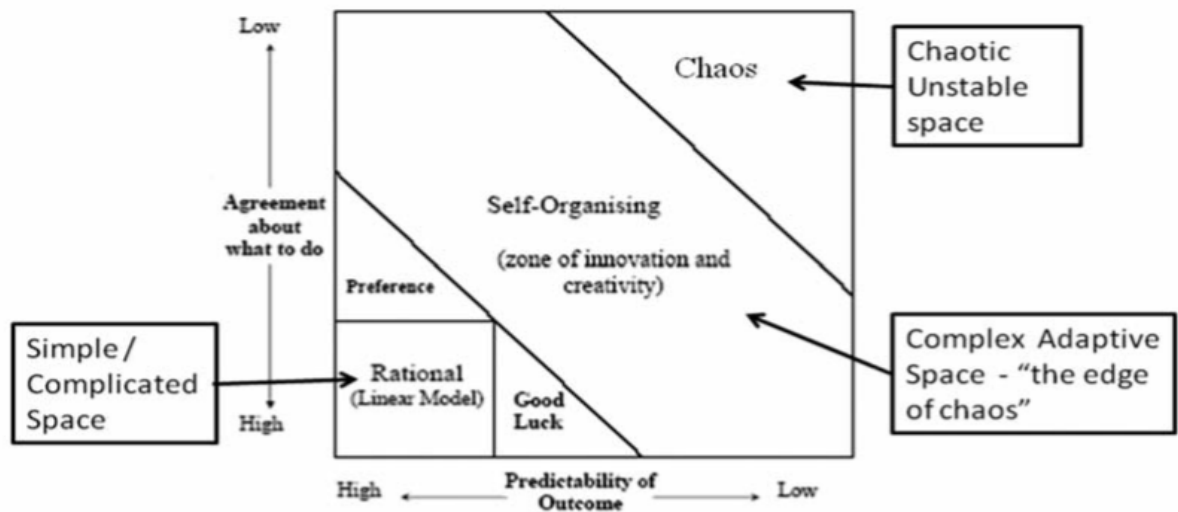
(Cavanagh & Lane, 2012)

Inefficient

"Not achieving maximum productivity; failing to make the best use of time or resources" (Oxford University Press, 2020).

The energy efficiency formula shows us the efficiency of energy usage and how much energy is wasted. In an inefficient system 100% initial effort is unlikely to contribute 100% useful

> *"If a system is inefficient a lot of energy/effort will be wasted"*

outcomes. The formula is useful energy output/total input energy. In this instance think of energy as the amount of effort that individuals put in. It is then clear that if a system is inefficient a lot of energy/effort will be wasted. This can inevitably lead to a loss of motivation and future effort to engage with the system as individuals may feel their effort is not bearing fruit. Inefficiency links to lower productivity. National statistics show 15 out of 18 city-regions had an increase in labour productivity between 2010-2018. **Liverpool city region was one of the three regions that saw a decline in average labour productivity (ONS, 2020)**. This may provide evidence of how inefficiencies in the city regions systems may be having negative effects on productivity which is something the LEP may want to address? In her book

The Silo Effect, Gillian Tett asks the question why so many organisations still struggle to communicate effectively? Or as psychologist Daniel Kahnemann said why are we so "blind to our own blindness"? Whilst this may seem like more questions than answers, it is important to start asking why the current system is inefficient and explore the root causes.

Cohesion

"the action of forming a united whole" (Oxford University Press, 2020)

Increased cohesion will reduce the feeling of the system being fractured and disjointed. Having all organisations "singing from the same hymn sheet" will allow the system to be more harmonious, effective and efficient in supporting the community.

> *"Identify who will champion creating a more cohesive system"*

An article in the Harvard Business Review looks at three ways leaders undermine cohesion. They include

1. creating big targets in lieu of having a real strategy,
2. using values to cover up cultural deficits and
3. having loads of meetings and reports instead of having clear decision-making processes (Carucci, 2015).

These issues may resonate with you as there is a general feeling that individuals want the system to be more cohesive but there is no clear strategy or ideas on how to make this a reality. Therefore, sweeping statements may be made with no tangible action being taken. This may be related to it being difficult to identify who will champion creating a more cohesive system as there are so many different organisations involved, each with different and sometimes conflicting priorities. A useful insight in this regard can be found in the book From Alpha to Zen: Leadership for a brave new world by Joy Maitland. This considers both dynamic and effective **leadership, which is needed in taking leadership of the system, which may change vastly and often, to find the right fit to enhance the benefits for the community.**

Connected

"brought together so that a real or notional link is established" (Oxford University Press, 2020)

Creating a more connected system will help with streamlining and enhance communication effectiveness. This has links to the perception of the system being fractured and discombobulated. Therefore, it is important to create robust relationships and networks. The importance of these cannot be understated.

> *"The system needs to encompass a common goal that all associated organisations agree with and share"*

Within networking, there are three distinct forms/levels which are,

1. operational (completing assigned tasks),
2. personal (individual effort to learn and find new opportunities) and
3. strategic (service of business-related goals) (Ibarra & Hunter, 2007).

The aim is to get to a strategic level of networking that will help link up the system. Relationships take it a step further with poet Maya Angelou saying, "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel". Shaking someone's hand and giving out a business card will not be as powerful as having memorable and meaningful value exchanges (Zalis, 2018). To fully connect there needs to be relationships within the networks which is how human nature works. Looking at meaningful connections from a psychological viewpoint both parties should get mutual benefit and the ability to share common interests and values (Heiser, 2020). In other words, the system needs to encompass a common goal that all associated organisations agree with and share. **The aim should be at creating an inclusive and influential system that supports the community to achieve prosperity.**

Disparate

"Essentially different in kind; not able to be compared" (Oxford University Press, 2020)

Synonyms for disparate include words such as dissimilar and contrasting. This indicates that the organisations within the system may be pulling in different directions due to competing priorities and aims. Whilst it is inevitable that different organisations have different priorities, such as the NHS prioritising healthcare and the police prioritising public protection and law enforcement, there needs to be a common goal, such as being a public servant. **The common goal of the system in Liverpool must have a clear and relentless pursuit of benefitting the individuals and the community in the city.** Liverpool has a diverse community with many different demographics with 4.2% of the local population being of Asian descent and 5.1% of the population being either black or mixed ethnicity (Liverpool City Council, 2021). This can create cultural differences which also includes differing organisational cultures, which means the system needs to be dynamic and adaptable. A report by the Institute for Government found cultural differences can discourage collaborations. (Wilson, et al., 2015). Looking at the below figure it is clear that there are many ways of joining up services. This example is aimed at joining up public sector services, but the principles can be applied in context to help make the system seem less disparate.

> *"The common goal of the system in Liverpool must have a clear and relentless pursuit of benefitting the individuals and the community in the city"*

Figure 2: Different ways of joining up services

Source: Institute for Government

Education in focus

Looking specifically at the education system in Liverpool, I encountered a general feeling that the student, educational institutions and business could all benefit from increased collaboration and partnerships across the business sectors.

> *"A rigid system will not suit everyone as individuals have different skills and abilities"*

Students could benefit from gaining industry-specific knowledge, skills and enhancing employability. Educational institutions benefit from learning what the industry demands are in terms of what skills they should put emphasis on, supporting the development of educational strategies and the businesses benefit from having access to talent pools.

Liverpool is one of the most deprived areas in the UK. It ranks 3rd out of 317 local authorities (Liverpool City Council, 2019). Educational achievement and advancement can offer young people the opportunity for achieving prosperity. It should be the right of all young people to have equal opportunities and an inclusive or maybe even "wrap-around" system can allow all students to achieve personal goals. A rigid system will not suit everyone as individuals have different skills and abilities and creating a system that is adaptive and includes a plethora of organisations can help more students find their so-called calling. I also believe this could help tackle the mental health crisis with half of mental health problems being established by the age of 14 and suicide being the third leading cause of death in fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds (WHO, 2020). Having an educational system that encourages personal success and is mindful of individual differences can help increase an individual's sense of worth and self-esteem which can help to develop a positive mindset. An informative book to read is Mindset: Changing The Way You Think To Fulfil Your Potential by Carole Dweck. She is an advocate for having a growth mindset that encourages resilience and a love for learning which can be fostered by teachers and parents.

Summary

The five themes of complex, inefficient, cohesion, connected and disparate provide an insight into why the current system is failing. Identifying reasons for failure is the first step in system change. All these themes contribute to the city regions challenges and make it difficult to find solutions. Each of these themes is linked by organisations and individuals working in silos and separate from each other. Drawing attention to these challenges may get you thinking of changes that you could make. I have included several questions to support the process of personal reflection.

Self-reflective questions

As you reflect on your role within our city system, I would invite you to respond to the following questions

1. Using the flock of birds' metaphor provided by Professor Ladyman, what are the few simple rules that you would advocate to enable us to collaborate in complexity?
2. How can you influence greater cohesion in your role in the city?
3. Who are you connected with? How could you develop those connections for the benefit of our community?
4. What ideas do you have to join up our city for the good of the community?
5. Who should champion collaboration in our city?

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June 2021

Liverpool

With thanks to:

- Andrew Ruffler (CEO of Professional Liverpool)
- Bill Addy (CEO of Liverpool BID company)
- Crispin Pailing (Liverpool Parish Church Rector)
- George McKane & Johnny Hesketh (Yellowhouse Founder & Director)
- Kathie Bates (Former Head of Civil Service Local)
- Lesleyann Craig (Enterprise Coordinator at Liverpool city region careers hub)
- Lisa Burgess (Merseyside Lead Civil Service Local)
- Matt Garlick (Head of Government Relations at Liverpool City Region Combined Authority)
- Paul Cherpeau (CEO of Liverpool Chamber of Commerce)
- Peter Gaul (Headteacher of Kings Leadership Academy Hawthornes)
- Stuart Fitzgerald (CEO and Founder of I am Moore, Socialised Ltd, Manwell and Board Member of LCR Combined Authority Social Justice Board)

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If you wish to respond to any of the issues raised in this report, please get in touch.

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