Complexity approach to frontline social work management: Constructing an emergent team leadership design for a managerialist world

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Abstract: *This paper articulates an emergent complexity approach to the frontline manager-practitioner relationship within the context of a managerialist culture and the tensions between new public management (NPM) and social work ethical codes. Drawing from New Zealand perspectives but with transnational applications, a conceptual 'coalface' practice model for social work is proposed. Three constituents comprising professional, organisational and political cultures in which social care managers operate are extrapolated to construct the model: [1] the pervasive reality of managerialism; [2] workplace tensions arising from interrelationships between ethics, the organisation and the individual worker; and [3] an emergent, organic perception of agencies as organisations, integrating 'whole systems' thinking and complex adaptive approaches.*

The paper analyses the argument advanced by NPM theory of the interoperability of public and private management and proposes a team design that meets managerialist output and performance expectations whilst also creating an emergent framework enabling team leadership flexibility. The paper suggests that high performance can be integrated with a management approach predicated on social work values, thus offering potential solutions to job stressors and challenges facing frontline team leaders, managers, supervisors and practitioners who function in a managerialist environment.

Key words: *complexity; frontline management; managerialism; ethics; leadership*

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Introduction

Recognition of management as a 'core purpose' of social work in 2004 by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) (Sewpaul & Jones, 2005, p.219) legitimates exploration of the values, place and function of social care leadership and management. Such exploration recognises that in day-to-day practice, organisational imperatives emanating from an agency's requisite outputs and key performance indicators frequently exercise disproportionately high influence on service quality to consumers. The voice of the profession is commonly a poor relation to senior management expectations which exert significant pressure on frontline managers and practitioners. In this context, the mediating function of middle and frontline managers assumes pivotal significance in translating those expectations into workable approaches designed to meet consumer needs while balancing the profession's ethic of empowering service delivery against new public management's demand for 'efficiency, economy and effectiveness' (Boston, Martin, Pallot, & Walsh, 1996; Coffey, Dugdill, & Tattersall, 2009). Middleman and Rhodes (1980, p.52) capture this tension in their insightful statement that

> the supervisor-worker relationship is the key encounter where the influence of organisational authority and professional identity collide, collude or connect.

This paper analyses professional and organisational influences converging at that 'key encounter.' The author proposes that management premised on social work values at that critical interaction between supervisor and frontline worker requires a paradigm shift whereby social work managerial *philosophy* determines organisational *design* and thus practice. Social work academic thinking assumes that management as a business school discipline governs managerial theory and practice in social care organisations (Tsui & Cheung, 2009); the respected British social work management academic text Coulshed, Mullender, Jones, and Thompson (2007, p.171), for example, contextualizes performance management in social work agencies by using Drucker's (1954) 'management by objectives' ('MBO').

However, critical reflections in social work literature are emerging on such approaches as Taylor's (1967) early 20th century 'scientific management,' resurrected since the 1970s as 'new public management' (NPM). Fiona Gardner's (2006) innovative treatment of 'creating connections for practice' offers analysis and vision for human service management by applying practice values and perspectives to the management task. This paper suggests that contributions such as Gardner's represent an incipient paradigm shift in moving scholarly and practitioner discourse away from fitting social care management thinking into historic managerial theory. Instead, conversations reflecting management 'as a conceptual field of practice *within* the principles and practices of social work' (Webster & Tofi, 2007, p.49, italics added)

are needed. Although not a social work educator, Weymes (2001, p.320) articulates a purposeful working definition of organisational leadership that social workers would endorse:

> Today, the literature is … implying a move from 'leaders and followers' to leaders as *inspirational players* … the success of an organisation is vested in the formation of *sustainable relationships*, with the primary purpose of leadership being to influence the *feelings and emotions* of those associated with the organisation; to *create the emotional heart* of the organisation and thus to determine the tenor of the relationships between the people inside and outside the organisation (italics added).

The organic qualities identified express a transformational social work vision of leadership and management, illustrating Bass and Avolio's (1993, p.112) transformational qualities of 'idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.'

Constructing a management model unique to social work calls for explicit adoption of the profession's underpinning values to influence management behaviours. From a New Zealand perspective, this paper proposes that constituents of this construction are drawn from the professional body's bicultural social work code of ethics (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers [ANZASW], 2008); indigenous approaches to organisation and management (Te Whaiti Nui-a-Toi, 2001); and management as a distinct discipline integrated with overarching 'whole systems' change management approaches (Attwood, Pedler, Pritchard, & Wilkinson 2003). These elements provide a framework in which management as a field of practice is located. Indigenous Maori living organisation images synergise with emergent complexity (Olsen & Eoyang, 2001; Lewin & Regine, 2001; Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007), servant leadership (Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson 2008), spirituality (Fawcett, S., Brau, Rhoads, Whitlark, & Fawcett, A., 2008) creating a management tapestry. Transcultural storytelling as powerfully contributing to cultural transformation is advocated. Gardner (2006) argues that telling stories develops clarity and makes sense of the narrative, acknowledging that stories *are* complex, messy, and continuing rather than well ordered and coherent. This paper argues that a narrative tapestry provides a potent balance to the re-emergence of a Taylorist scientific model which has contributed to deskilling social work practice under the guise of new managerial effectiveness, efficiency and economy.

Construction of this paper

The author proposes that three components define the professional, organisational and political cultures in which frontline social work managers function. The first is the managerialist environment in which social work agencies typically operate – alternatively termed 'new public management' (NPM). The second is found in the tensions which arise from the interaction between social work ethical values and NPM (Stewart & Webster). The third integrates a 'current realities' conceptual diagnosis emanating from the first two and constructs an emergent social work model of management. This paper suggests that cultural diagnosis – behaviours, values, beliefs and assumptions (Schein, 2004) – must precede application of philosophy, a process paralleling Senge's (1990) argument that 'learning disabilities' require treatment if learning systems tools are to be effective.

Figure 1 illustrates the tensions arising from these components requiring synthesis for a frontline social work model of management.

Figure 1. Synthesising tensions for a frontline social work model of management
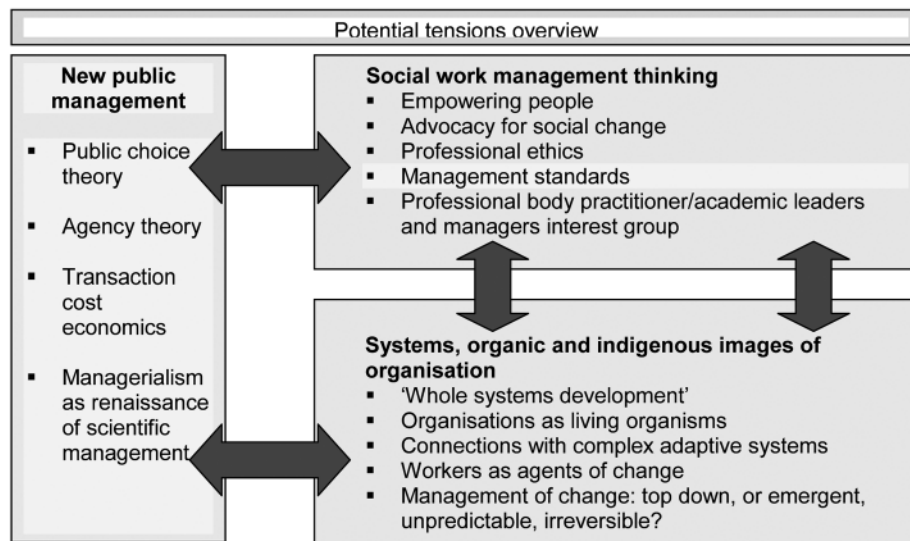
The pervasive reality of NPM: Implications for coalface service delivery

NPM influence on statutory social work agencies – and via principal-agent relationships to non governmental organisations – has been extensively examined by social work academics. Even in the last two years, published papers have *inter alia* addressed 'Taylorist managerial control' (Carey, 2009) and 'Taylorised' ie 'deskilled'

practitioners (Fitzgibbon 2008); 'staffing crisis' in UK social services caused by a drive for greater efficiencies, effectiveness and economies (Coffey, et al., 2009); and professional-bureaucratic tensions arising from information communication technology [ICT] (Burton & Van den Broek, 2009). Taylorist managerial discourse illustrates the NPM 'analytically driven movement of unusual coherence' noted by Hood's (1991) examination of the New Zealand model.

This paper focuses on frontline manager-practitioner interactions, analysing managerialist policy and practice influencing coalface service delivery to enable organisational diagnosis and redesign. The objective for this exercise is to apply social work values to 'moments of truth:' worker-consumer interactions epitomising the culture of the organisation (Grönroos, 1990, as cited in Moullin 2002, p.25). Interactions at odds with social work ethics may suggest organisational dysfunctionality at the worker-consumer 'moment of truth.'

This paper applies Boston et al's (1996) analysis of an overarching NPM descriptor relevant to frontline practice – the argument for transferable management between public and private sectors. It is not an exhaustive treatment.

Interoperability of public and private management?

The notion of interoperability of public and private management and a shift in emphasis from process accountability to accountability for results (Boston et al., 1996, p.26) represents a *non sequitur* for social care leadership and management. This rubric effectively reduces the frontline management task to one of accountability for measuring outputs and performance targets, replacing accountability for social work processes via professional supervision (O'Donoghue, Baskerville, & Trlin, 1999, pp.8-9). Arguably, frontline managers may become fixated checking data on computer monitors at the cost of maintaining social capital with practitioners, neglecting 'leadership behaviors that foster participatory management' (Elpers & Westhuis, 2008, p.40).

'Participatory management' resonates with Follett's notion of 'power with' as distinct from 'power over' (Graham, 1995) leadership value in social care organisations. These concepts are illustrated by Erez, Lepine, and Elms' (2002) investigation into team performance and membership satisfaction, suggesting that leadership behaviours are mediated through team design. Erez and his colleagues (2002, p.942) unexpectedly found that

> peer ratings for evaluation and reward … promoted workload sharing, voice, and cooperation, and … translated into higher levels of performance and member satisfaction.

Limitations associated with the study included 'fairly homogeneous ethnic background' of the teams unlikely be replicated in the workplace, and a 'quasi-

experiment' with tertiary students 'did not consider a team structure where the leader was also responsible for providing specific evaluations of his or her subordinates' (Erez et al., 2002, pp.944-945).

Notwithstanding these limitations, potential benefits accruing from applying peer ratings and rotated leadership in a workplace social work team warrant critical evaluation. While clearly predicated on a high level of trust, this approach is philosophically congruent with the profession's empowerment ethos expressed in Follett's management model. Implementation would require genuine power sharing and strengthened negotiating skills. Team members' ownership of responsibility would enhance qualities of team cohesion, add to group capacity for leadership skill development and integrate professional and organisational fields of practice through appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008) – management's variant of strengths based practice.

An unintended serendipity of peer rating and rotated leadership also emerges. Erez et al (2002, p.942) note 'higher levels of team performance' as the approach is implemented. Skilful facilitation processes strengthen a professional ethic and also engender NPM efficiencies and effectiveness. Complexity perspectives of change emerge, demonstrating that even in a new managerialist world a living, organic approach to achieving requisite outputs is possible. This paper suggests however that the model proposed is likely to encounter inertia at best – and hostility at worst – if implemented among social workers with a cynical perspective of management initiatives. A pilot project with practitioners who combine a professional ethic for empowering individuals and challenging unjust structures (ANZASW, 2008), with innovation or pacesetting may be appropriate. Wood and Alterio (1995, 2.12.2) describe 'innovators' as professionals who 'push frontiers, creating and testing … new knowledge and ideas'; pacesetters 'welcome … new … ideas but wait until they have been well tested by innovators before adopting them' (Wood & Alterio 1995, 2.12.3). Strategies needed to implement Wood and Alterio's 'Z-Zoner' model are canvassed later in this paper.

Morgeson, DeRue, and Karam (2010, pp.7-9) address team dynamics by examining leadership actions enabling a team to meet its 'critical needs' (eg 'psychological safety'), thereby 'fostering team effectiveness.' These authors suggest that 'in any given team there are multiple sources of leadership.' These sources enable expression of worker 'voice' articulated by Erez et al. (2002) in earlier discussion – that is, emergent leadership qualities articulating social work practice values. Citing Attwood et al. (2003, pp.58-74), McNabb and Webster (2010, p.44) identify these qualities and values as

'Humanising servant leadership;' 'holding frameworks' for shared … 'mission' by 'appropriate dialogue'; 'diversity' as a source of 'innovation and learning'; holding the dynamic tensions between 'autonomy and direction' … communication modes; 'building a learning community' informed by 'living' organisational images.

Ethics, the organisation and the individual: tensions in workplace settings

This paper's second component comes out of almost a century of ethics by professional social work (Reamer, 1998). The place of ethics in developing 'effective practice' and 'improving organisational culture' at the frontline manager-practitioner level is predicated on Banks' (2008, p.1238) definition of 'social work ethics' as

> a specialist area of professional ethics comprising the study of the norms of right action, good qualities of character and values relating to the nature of the good life that are aspired to, espoused and enacted by social workers in the context of their work.

This definition usefully integrates ethical values of social work conduct and personal character attributes of the social worker applied to the organisation which legitimates practice. The use of self has long been seen as tacitly informing professional practice (Davies, 1994; Reupert, 2007). In this paper, it is used to define the 'moment of truth' between practitioner and consumer expressing organisational culture demonstrated in the quality of that interaction. Arnd-Caddigan and Pozzuto (2008, p.235) capture that emergent interaction by defining self as 'a function of relationships with others in which the self is continually created, maintained and re-created.' The author suggests that tacit skills reflecting professional ethics will be unconsciously integrated into a worker-consumer encounter as a behavioural expression of the assumptions, values and beliefs (Schein, 2004) which make up the culture of the employing organisation. Efficacious management is a prime contributor to that culture as the 'container' in which complex adaptive systems operate (Lewin & Regine, 2001). The question is: Are emergent processes in bicultural practice envisioned in the ANZASW (2008) Code of Ethics capable of thriving in an NPM context?

Ethics in a managerialist environment

Social work practice by members of the ANZASW is governed by the Association's Code of Ethics (ANZASW, 2008). Although the purpose of an ethical code is to engender trust in professionals by society and service consumers, managerialist prescriptive codes may diminish trust (Banks, 2004). The issue of trust in ethical decision making by social workers has also been raised as a concern in the New Zealand context of social work registration in 2003 which has arguably reduced the focus on social justice, where ethical issues abound (O'Brien, 2005; Orme & Rennie, 2004; Pitt, 2005).

Issues of trust in decisions by social workers in the context of these disparate ethical and organisational forces are analysed in this section of the paper which examines

- the purpose of codes of ethics generally and the Bicultural Code adopted by the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers in particular
- tensions of deprofessionalisation and practice (Banks, 2004)
- ethics and ethical dilemmas in day-to-day practice

Purpose of codes of ethics

The ANZASW Code's purposes include:

- Benchmarks for client protection against unethical behaviours
- Inspire professional behaviour reflecting core values and integrity of practice
- Promote a standard of professional behaviour amongst members
- Underpin everyday practice (ANZASW 2008, 6)

These purposes filter through the Code's recognition of the 'unique constitutional foundation of … Te Tiriti o Waitangi' [The Treaty of Waitangi]' calling *inter alia* for application of indigenous Maori 'social work models of practice' (ANZASW, 2008, p.6). Social work's commitment to indigenous practice perspectives almost inevitably produces conflict with a 'discourse of modernisation' (Banks, 2004, p.41). 'Pressure points' of efficiency, performance and practice model standardisation (Banks, 2004, p.42) may be represented by competency-based training driven by employers, rather than professional standards inclusive of Treaty-based practice.

This paper suggests that the managerial agenda meets professional ethics at this practice interface; that the NPM agenda is not only exercised through exception reporting and imposed top down processes ('pressure points') but more potently through a sense of powerlessness by social workers leading to a culture of alienation. Staff turnover, resulting in the loss of institutional and practice wisdom, is tangible evidence of such alienation. The author recalls fifty percent turnover over three years in his statutory agency's local area from 1998 on as NPM became the dominating culture. A memorable statement revealing this agenda was, perhaps unwittingly, articulated by the general manager of the agency that she was 'driven by numbers.'

Burton and Van den Broek (2009, p.1326) illustrate Banks' (2004) observations around 'efficiency, audit and managerial control' by describing how reliance on information communication technology (ICT) for quality assurance and accountability purposes has shifted 'professional values … to organisational and bureaucratic accountabilities.' They note 'substantial changes in work practices, processes and relationships for social workers … tensions between professional and bureaucratic accountabilities have intensified.' These changes, not merely ideological, influence day-to-day practice: for example, ICT ability to measure outputs may reduce attention to 'user outcomes' (Burton & Van den Broek, 2009, p.1328).

Ethics in day-to-day practice

Computer-driven demands for data, for example, may undercut ethics' intentions to 'underpin everyday practice' (ANZASW, 2008, p.6). Frontline practitioners may perceive senior management information demands as exerting such pressure (Banks, 2004) that direct client contact becomes ethically uninformed. Banks (2008, p.1241) cites a Canadian study (Rossiter et al., 2000) reporting that 'codes are not used in practice and practitioners are often only dimly aware of their existence.'

This paper suggests that the plethora of reporting requirements by managerial demands for quantitative data has significantly affected social work's dual ethical focus on consumer empowerment and challenging unjust structures (ANZASW, 2008). Newly recruited workers may perceive ethics as a debating point rather than as an integrative force for practice – arguably representing an institutionalised cultural shift in which the education, experience, and personalities of social work recruits is located – the worker's 'capacity'. Banks (2009, p.9-10) articulates an emergent notion of capacity as 'moral competence' whereby a 'process of continuous reflexive sense-making … may even involve re-evaluating and giving up previously held ideals and principles.' It is precisely this potential susceptibility to prevailing NPM organisational cultural suasion that may displace a new recruit's commitment to the social work ethic in favour of quantitative reporting as evidence of good practice.

Gray captures this susceptibility in her graphic depiction of current social work practice struggling to constructively integrate professional ethical values in the context of powerful organisational 'prescriptive' imperatives (Gray, 2009, p.3). Gray argues (p.13) that applying a care ethic to social work practice in 'risk-aversive, managerial social service environments' cannot be implemented, but pathways to 'compassion, consideration and care of others' by practitioners can be facilitated through 'values education' (virtues ethicists) or in 'caring relationships' (care ethicists).

Integrating a virtue or care ethic into social work practice implies that the moral and ethical legitimacy of the profession is at stake if that ethic is marginalised (Bisman, 2004). Values, argues Bisman (p.120), must drive the quest for the knowledge base of social work; and social work leadership is responsible for society's response to 'human well-being.' This paper applies Bisman's advocacy for societally-directed values leadership by the profession to the organisational sphere – that the ethical values intrinsic to worker-client interactions are evaluated in the light of 'the requirements of occupational roles' (Clark, 2006, p.80). In short, the ethical values-based coalface delivery of services to consumers must be congruent with organisational structures, policies and the quality of manager-worker relations.

The insights afforded by Gray, Bisman and Clark connect with Banks' emergent approach to ethical competence capacity building in the professional organisation. An emergent vision of ethics and organisation is also implicit through Hugman's (2003, p.8) postmodern interpretive discourse in which he notes that ethics are 'non-rational', that 'an exhaustive set of 'laws' cannot be applied and that 'contradictions

are irresolvable' How might these perceptions be applied in the frontline perspective?

Such 'irresolvable' issues are polarities to be managed, distinguishable from problems capable of solution (Johnson, 1992). Polarities cannot be neatly analysed with diagnostic tools such as strengths/weaknesses/ opportunities/threats frameworks and do not readily allow clear, feasible options for action. Johnson argues that collaborative management 'relying on mutual assistance, support, cooperation, or interaction among constituent members' (Encarta Dictionary) is required to address polarities – for example, ongoing tensions between strengths perspectives (Saleebey, 2006) and risk assessment (Webb, 2006). Witkin's (2000) expressive phrase 'ethics-r-us' calls for 'ethics talks,' an implicit argument for a polarity discourse between practitioners, supervisors, senior managers and board governance scaffolding discussion to an emergent social work model of management.

Framework for an emergent social work model of management

In his cultural diagnostic tool, Schein (2004, p.17) draws from social anthropology in defining organisational culture as

> A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems.

Schein (2004, p.26) identifies three 'levels of culture.' (1) Assumptions – the 'unconscious, taken-for-granted ultimate source of values and actions' – are expressed in (2) values and beliefs which in turn result in (3) artefacts i.e. observable behaviour and physical objects. Although Schein implies that behaviour influences values which in turn influence assumptions, he nonetheless argues that leaders must be able to understand those assumptions if they are to be challenged and changed (pp.36-37). In contrast, Attwood and her colleagues (2003, p.138) suggest that in earnest discussions about changing the culture … so often nothing really feels the change, especially the culture.' These authors propose that cultures will change as people in organisations tackle 'significant concrete tasks' (pp138-139). The author suggests that to actualise social work's commitment to change – including social workers' function as change agents within their own agencies – both Schein and Attwood et al. carry validity. Discourses of the profession's philosophical underpinnings are integral to intellectual debates practitioners need; but equally, 'the journey of a thousand miles starts with a single [physical] step.' Action steps authenticate practice integrity, obligating critical evaluation of organisational values against those of the profession.

With Schein, Attwood et al. in mind, this paper asks: How might the constituencies

discussed in this paper be crafted into a workable model for coalface service delivery? Revisiting figure 1, these constituencies are:

- Tensions contributing to frontline practice stressors caused by conflict between professional social work ethical codes and 'scientific' Taylorist managerialism (Banks, 2004; Bisman, 2004; Boston et al., 1996; Clark, 2006; Gray ,2009; Hood, 1991; Hugman, 2003)
- An emergent, organic perception of agencies as organisations, integrating 'whole systems' thinking and complex adaptive approaches (Attwood et al,. 2003; Lewin & Regine ,2001; Morgan 1 997; Olson & Eoyang, 2001; Uhl-Bien et al,. 2007) with indigenous 'living' lenses through which organisation is viewed (Te Whaiti-Nui-a-Toi, 2001).
- Constructing a diversity-based social work management model via practitioner-academic collaboration in the context of the ANZASW Leaders and Managers Interest group (ANZASW, 2008; McNabb & Webster, 2010; Sewpaul & Jones, 2005): workers as agents for 'second order' culture change (Van de Ven & Poole, 2009) using complexity thinking

The author proposes Attwood et al's (2003) 'whole systems development' as an enabling framework to apply these constituencies by generating 'containers' (Olson and Eoyang, 2001) in which worker creativity can flourish. By thus recognising diversity thinking, this emergent approach facilitates culture change embodying the social work vision for leadership expressed by Weymes (2001) and McNabb and Webster (2010). The author also suggests that this pathway synergises with servant leadership, workplace spirituality, and storytelling.

A way forward: Applying a 'whole systems development' framework

The 'five keys of whole systems development' identified by Attwood et al. (2003, xv) (figure 2) emanate from emergent notions of organisation described as 'complex adaptive systems' ('CAS') (Attwood et al. 2003, p.23) which apply a biological rather than a 'mechanistic process' (Lewin & Regine, 2001, p.24). Complexity theory explores leadership actions and workforce diversity by focusing on interactions between individual 'agents' in a CAS (Lewin & Regine, 2001, p.27). In describing complex systems, Morgan (1997, p.34) evokes biological images of 'relations among *molecules, cells, complex organisms, species,* and *ecology* [as paralleling] *individuals, groups, organisations, populations (species) of organisations,* and their *social ecology*.'

This paper suggests that whole systems development offers an integrated framework to create a 'container' (Olson & Eoyang, 2001) for change whereby change agents can facilitate an emergent frontline team leadership model. Olson and Eoyang (2001, pp.11-12) propose that self-organising patterns are shaped by

these 'containers' which set boundaries and may be geographic, eg department or team; behaviourally-based, eg professional identification; or conceptual, eg identity, purpose, procedures or budgets. Pathways for change – enabled by mutual group trust – avoid prescription in favour of an emergent approach employing the referent power given to those we admire or respect rather than coercive, expert, legitimate or reward power (French and Raven, 1959).

Figure 2
The five keys of whole systems development
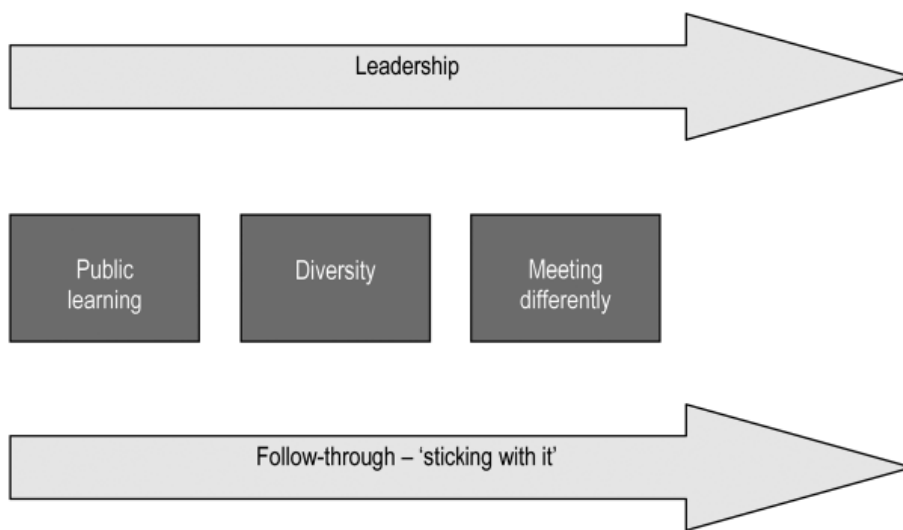
Source: Attwood, M., Pedler, M., Pritchard, S., & Wilkinson, D. (2003). *Leading Change: A guide to whole systems working*. (p.xv). Bristol: Policy Press. Reproduced by permission

The whole systems framework provides human service change agents with the elements for creating an emergent team leadership model through an environmental scan: the 'balcony view' (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997 as cited in Attwood et al., 2003, p.61). Although there are five 'keys', the focus in this paper on 'leadership design' and journal space limitations concentrates attention on the leadership key.

Leadership

Attwood and her colleagues (2003, p.30) implicitly suggest that providing solutions for managing organisational change carry high failure rates. Kotter (1995) admits that most change programmes fail. What is needed, say Attwood et al. (2003, pp.31, 32), is that the leader asks the right systemic questions:

1. How can I best use my position … to assist us all to make sense of what is going on, so that together we can contribute to sustainable change?
2. How do I lead this organisation so that we can make the best possible contribution to the improvement and wellbeing of those we serve?
3. How can I share my ideas and emerging goals in ways that do not stultify debate but assist learning about the 'bigger picture'?
4. How do I ensure that we implement plans that we have agreed with partners?

This paper proposes four pathways for change leaders to actualise responses to these questions: Servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Liden et al., 2008); the Z-Zoner model (Wood & Alterio, 1995); workplace spirituality (Fawcett et al., 2008); and storytelling (Gardner, 2006). Because affinities exist between servant leadership and workplace spirituality they will be considered together.

The last section of this paper is not prescriptive, suggesting instead that practitioners acting as change agents might find that values and behaviours outlined provoke thinking and potential application.

Servant leadership and workplace spirituality

Research carried out by Liden and his colleagues (2008, p.162) suggests that servant leadership 'focuses on developing employees to their fullest potential in … task effectiveness, community stewardship, self-motivation, and future leadership capabilities.' This is no easy option. Together with notions of 'value creation' and 'emotional healing,' servant leadership articulates conceptual skills to push practitioners out of their comfort zones. Expectations of personal and career growth, of problem-solving and task completion are equally important, for example, as 'putting subordinates first' (Liden et al. 2008, 166).

Servant leadership synergises with qualities of workplace spirituality, which carries capacity for organisational 'creativity and innovative solutions' (Fawcett et al. 2008, 420), Fawcett and his colleagues equate workplace spirituality with a 'values-based organisation' (2008, 425), identifying fifteen workplace attributes which also connect with Wood and Alterio's (1995) Z-Zoner approach. Summarised, these attributes are valued work which extends worker capacity and recognise efforts made; depth of collegial interactions; managers who empower, guide and as leaders provide 'clear and consistent' behaviours; fostering collaboration, respect, commitment to a mission surpassing monetary reward; consumer orientation; learning from mistakes; self-management. Applying leadership wisdom which come out of these attributes creates perceptions of 'affirmation, belonging and competence' ((Fawcett et al., 2008, p.425, p.428), illustrating relationship/task dimensions in Blake and Mouton's (1985) 'managerial grid'.

Figure 3

Framework for creating Z-Zoners
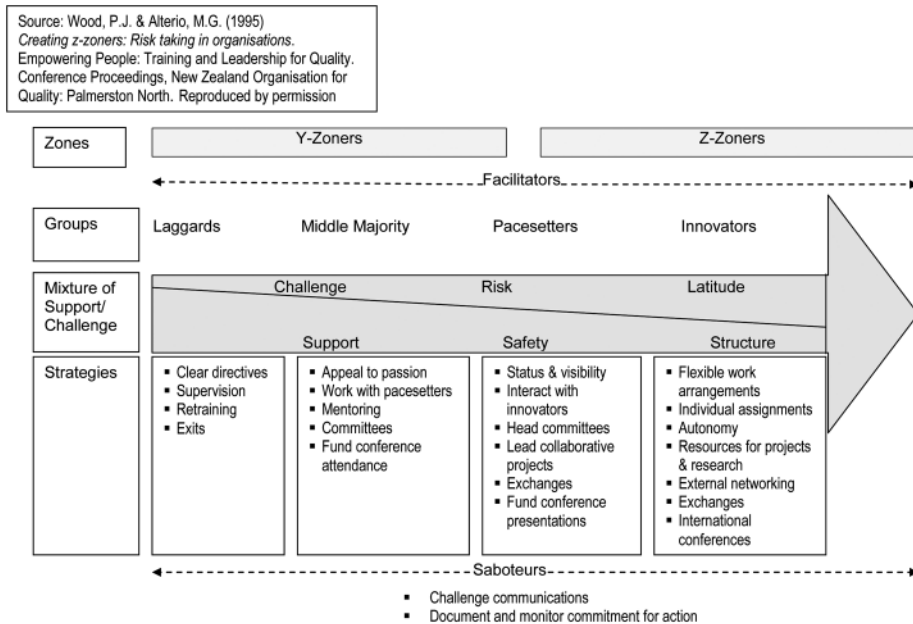
Z-Zoner model

Wood and Alterio's (1995) Z-Zoner framework (Figure 3) offers potential strategies for actions arising from servant leadership and workplace spirituality. This paper suggests that the framework applies to rotated leadership (Erez et al., 2002), emergent leadership (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007) as well as conventional line management structures. Indeed, the author argues that the Z-Zoner approach facilitates emergent collaborative decision-making and in a social work agency environment acts as additional leverage for implementing Follett's power sharing approach (Graham, 1995). Rotated leadership advocated by Erez et al. (2002) implicitly requires team 'buy-in' for implementation. Combination with a peer reward system plainly reinforces equity outcomes. Conventional line manager decisions are arguably more susceptible to dissatisfaction: rotated leadership projects the message that all team members will eventually be stretched by decision-making leadership responsibility. Strategies suggested for 'laggards' and 'saboteurs' by Wood and Alterio may in fact carry added weight if exercised by collegial leadership, as 'blame' messages directed towards the hierarchy are effectively targeting colleagues.

This paper suggests that a collegial power-sharing culture contributes to the creation of 'containers' – noted previously – in which workers can be professionally stretched in 'safe' spheres of action (Olson and Eoyang, 2001). A feedback loop to

Attwood et al's call for workers to tackle 'significant concrete tasks' (2003, p.138, p.139) is also discernible as an agent for culture change: tangible actions are arguably as, or more, powerful than another talkfest about agency climate.

Assumptions

In 'normal' times – if there is such a thing – as well as in times of change, subordinates cannot understand a chief executive's isolation. I've given everything to this organisation – hard work, intellectual grunt, and playing the political game. It's a competitive and hierarchical world. I have to rely on my own judgment in making decisions because no one else has the complete picture. I'm paid to think. What I need from my staff is a return on the investment we've made in them – training, salary, subsidised university courses. It's a fair contract. No subordinate can understand the pressures of my position. Only fellow chief executives appreciate the stresses that come with the territory.

Whatever management's perceptions, those of us delivering frontline services to consumers know that without our work there would be no organisation to manage. The success of the enterprise depends on our knowledge, skill base and commitment to the task at hand.   Unpredictable behaviour by our consumers requires continual upskilling and ability to respond to surprises. We work best in interdependent teams which value collaboration, transparency and trust. Operational 'how to' manuals cannot cover every eventuality.

Designing processes which implement scientific, technological solutions for operations are models of precision and simplicity guaranteed to deliver to customers. We think of ourselves as engineers, providing best design solutions to master environmental challenges. Problem-solving is enjoyable and should exclude worker input – people are the problem because they make mistakes. Harmony in designed processes is the ideal model to produce outcomes which improve on existing services.

Storytelling

Storytelling is emerging in organisation literature as a sense making phenomenon in which events and changes are interpreted by individuals at different hierarchical levels (Gardner, 2006). Beech, MacPhail, and Coupland (2009, p.337) identify 'dialogical stories' enabling alternatives to the dominant discourse – a practical route to Gardner's (2006) call to develop clarity and make sense of the narrative. Perceptions of the 'self' by others are constituted in stories of organisational change and reactions of players to each other (Beech et al. 2009, p.338). An example, translated from the organisational literature, follows overleaf.

'Assumptions' retells in narrative form Edgar Schein's 'executive, operator and

engineer subcultures' (Schein 2004, pp.198-199). It illustrates the powerful images created by the 'silo' effect and lack of mutual understanding between interdependent groups in the organisation – human and social services no less than profit-making corporations. Narratives can be fixed-point observations – what Beech et al. (2008, p.337) describe as 'monological … stories … told from one perspective … not amenable to questioning or criticism.' 'The ant' (http://www.scribd.com/The-Ant/d/12991307) is an amusing example; but the fixed-point message is unmistakable.

Beech et al. adopt emergent thinking in their discourse, observing that narrators in 'self-sealed stories' did not engage, precluding 'dialogue' (2009, p.349). Drawing on Shotter (2006), they contrast 'aboutness monological thinking' which fails to relate to others as 'living objects' with 'withness dialogical thinking' which engenders 'touch, contact' and leads to a genuine response between the parties. This paper proposes that the change agent in human services – manager, supervisor or frontline practitioner alike – can create a dialogue of engagement as an emergent 'container' to build a team leadership design.

Conclusion

The author suggests that most social work practitioners and managers are committed to integrate the historic ethos of the profession into organisational reality. However, the sheer demands of day-to-day practice with consumers, staff or other stakeholders, part-time academic study or participating in yet another project team, may preclude initiating cultural change. An emergent complexity approach to frontline management thinking simultaneously carries both significant risk of failure and potential for creative culture change by those most directly responsible for coalface service delivery: the practitioners and their immediate team leaders. The author proposes that the ideas expressed in this paper integrate recognition of the realities of NPM – so focused on outputs, measurements and key performance indicators – with opportunity for an emergent creativity in the construction of a social work vision for frontline management and service delivery. That construction provides an alternative to the route so many of us have taken exemplified by George Orwell's (1946) 'Boxer' in *Animal Farm*: 'I will work harder.' Using a commonplace expression, this is a 'win-win' outcome for all parties.

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