The Unreasonable Learners

Petition 1423
A reply to the Responses to the above Petition

Opportunity: We believe that The Petitions Committee have a significant opportunity to take a massively influential role in accelerating the organisational learning of the Scottish Parliament, Government and Society at large (For a definition of organisational learning see note 1)

We would hope that this reply to the responses from the public sector bodies will encourage the committee to continue with this petition, especially through the suggested round table discussions. The discussions would be around the challenges ahead and how they might be addressed.

The Petition
Our starting point is to recognise the broad based intention of moving Government and the Public sector forward; plus the considerable effort being invested in achieving the desired goals.

Despite this significant effort the public sector is still constrained by the pervading paradigm of management, which is characterised by a system of compliance (often referred to as a "Command and Control" culture). This paradigm has limits. It has targets that encourage the distortion of data; it has regulations, audit and inspection regimes that become the customer rather than the service user; there is undue growth in bureaucracy with its inherent waste; we measure the wrong things and it has engendered a risk averse culture. (see note 2 – The Continuing Problems)

Furthermore we are failing to learn from successful projects (see note 3 – A Lack of Learning)

"*We cannot solve our problems from the same level of __thinking__ that created them; and the sign of madness is doing the same things over and over again, expecting different results*" Albert Einstein

The issue that this petition wishes to put on the table is that expressed by Einstein and the vast array of enlightened "management" thinkers over the past decades. That if we want to secure change we do need to identify and challenge the very basis of **the thinking within our organisations.** Our argument is that we have not made the expected progress because we have tended to layer new approaches on top of old thinking. Furthermore traditional thinking has acted as a barrier to an array of excellent intentions. Our call is to move our focus from the application of methods or tools, and onto the use of a cyclical learning discipline that includes the identification of the theoretical assumptions, or thinking, that underpins practice. (see note 4 - The Learning Track)

When we apply new thinking, in say a particular project area, there is no doubt gains have been secured. There is a significant improvement in performance as well as a considerable uplift in the morale of the people involved. (see note 5 – It Works)

The responses from the seven public service organisations reflected laudable energy being invested in the challenge of moving forward. The Improvement Service talked about the need for new leadership thinking and paradigms. Glasgow City Council talked about the opportunities to think differently and enabling staff to be innovative in defeating bureaucracy. Fife Council talked about lean and process improvement projects. And there is considerable effort being invested in the development of staff.

However none of the respondents addressed the fundamental request of the petition which was **to identifying the underlying assumptions of their organisation**. No one identified and challenged the assumptions that underpin our current compliance culture (Command and Control) that is so damaging to the morale and creativity of front line staff.

The whole basis of this petition is Einstein's recognition that if the underlying assumptions of the **organisation** are not challenged and remain the same, then we fail to learn and the outcomes will be largely the same.

As an aside, the answer is not in the development of people. Front line personnel do not need to be told that they are intrinsically motivated to do a good job, nor that the design of the system in which they work has a massive impact in their ability to provide a quality service to their the customers.

Another crucial consideration is the measures the organisation uses to monitor its operation. There is little doubt that what passes over the CEOs desk has a major influence on how the organisation behaves.

At the hearing of the petition several important questions were raised. They included:-

- if Government was to move away from "targets" how would it manage and maintain control of the public purse;
- if we encouraged learning through experimentation how would we deal with public perception when experiments "fail;"
- how do we maintain long term continuity,
- how do we enable the electorate to take their share of responsibility for the limits of public expenditure.

All these questions relate to the holistic challenge of how our society thinks - a major challenge in the way ahead.

We are asking the Petitions Committee to start the ball rolling in addressing a massive paradigm shift across our society.

But we have technology on our side. The modern internet and social media are powerful tools that can involve our citizens. Furthermore there are many forward thinking groups in our society – the Unreasonable Learners being just one – who are committed to Scotland's future

Recommendations and Proposals:

Opportunity – we believe that the Petitions Committee has a significant opportunity to make a real and lasting difference to Scottish Society. The following are some suggestions as to how we might make progress in this regard.

The Starting Point - Round Table Discussions – we very much liked the proposition of having open round table discussions with MSPs and invited guests to explore the opportunities and challenges of creating an organisational learning culture based on new ways of thinking. The following might be some of the considerations that would come out of these discussions.

Research into the Actual Theories in Use with the Public Sector – A project could be initiated to deduce the actual theories in use in the Public Sector. The information would be secured through consideration of the methods that are employed and the measurements that are taken. The project would also gain an understanding through open and extensive conversations with front line staff and the service users. The findings would be compared with recent researched findings about motivation and systems. It would also explore the thinking that has underpinned the highly successful projects.

Monitoring Data – As mentioned above the data collected by an organisation has a major impact on how it is managed. Furthermore the data collected from a basis of new thinking is very different from that gathered within a Command and Control organisation. A study could be conducted to define the data that would be collected in the future and how it would be utilised to more effectively manage the public purse.

Facilitating National Debates – Again as mentioned above there will be a need to involve citizens in the paradigm shift demanded by recent research. How this might be achieved could be a major part of the round table discussions but it is envisaged that modern technology and social media would play a major role. A study could be initiated as to how this might be achieved.

Gordon Hall
For The Unreasonable Learners.

Notes

Note 1 – Organisational Learning
In the past we have had a mindset that learning is wholly in the domain of the individual. However it is now recognised that an organisation, a community and society has a learning ability. An organisation is a collection of individuals **plus** the connections between the individuals. The term organisational learning refers to the continual improvement of the design of the connections between the individuals.

Note 2 – Examples of the Continuing Problems

The Control of Drugs   The Death of Alison Hume -

Cost £3.4 billion   A Lawyer and Mother

The above three examples demonstrate the problem.

1. The first diagram is a systems diagram of the process to change a £4.50 three pin socket in a council house. It portrays how the continual attempts to control all possibilities have allowed bureaucracy to run wild.
2. There is a growing recognition that efforts to prevent drug harms over the past 40 years by the "command and control" approach of blanket prohibition of certain substances has fallen far short of expectations in Scotland and globally. High levels of health and social harms exist in Scotland with socioeconomic costs of some £3.4 billion annually. At the same time a completely different approach is taken regarding alcohol and tobacco. This split in policy is an example of reductionist thinking. There is now a need for society-wide discussion about a more integrated approach to the prevention of substance abuse including an evaluation of the potential benefits in Scotland of some measures of decriminalisation in the short-term as is increasingly the case in many other countries.
3. The third is that of Alison Hume (A Lawyer) who fell down a mine shaft in Ayrshire. The front line Fire and Rescue personnel were stopped from rescuing Alison until the established procedure could be adhered to. She was eventually recovered through a copy book rescue, except that it took 7 hours instead of 3, and Alison died on the way to hospital through a heart attack brought on by hypothermia. The regulations became the customer rather than the service user.

Note 3 - Lack of Learning
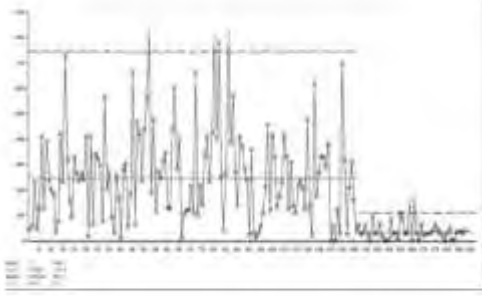
The graph portrays the improvement achieved on the justice system project in Grampian. It was facilitated by Vanguard Consulting. It was able to reduce the time taken from when a person is charged to the conclusion of the court case. The measureable outcome was a reduction from 245 days to 33 days. The unmeasurable progress was the significant uplift in morale as front line staff felt that they were actually doing the job they were paid for.

This project utilised different underpinning assumptions to achieve its results. Unfortunately the long term outcome was that lessons were not learnt, the status quo thinking was not challenged and the results were, with time, eroded back the original outcomes.

Jim Duffy when he was the improvement officer with NHS Tayside oversaw a project with the Community Physiotherapy department. By studying the system and involving front line staff the team were able to reduce waiting times from 98 days to just 5, eliminate the problems of "patient not attending" (DNAs) and reduce overall demand by 45% - and of course give the patient a much better service. The success of this project was down to applying different thinking. The NHS as a whole did not learn from this example.

Note 4 - A Learning Track

Learning throughout the centuries has been through a cyclical process of postulating a theory, conducting experiments and then checking the validity of the original theory, namely "Scientific Method." It has been the basis of the remarkable progress in engineering and medicine over the past century. The call over the past decades – from Einstein, to McGregor, to Kuhn, to Deming, to Dan Pink has been for "Management" to adopt a similar cyclical discipline to the development of their profession.

Dr Tony Miller in representing the above cyclical learning track called for us to move our focus from methods to theories. We should also recognise that this is not an academic process but a daily process of studying outcomes relative to the above cyclical process – action research.

He also emphasised that he was not promoting specific theories. One set of theories may be applicable to one situation while another might be more appropriate in other

circumstances. He simply asked that when a method is proposed then the underpinning theories are fully discussable.

Note 5 - It Works

While Dr Miller was at pains to point out there is no one set of applicable theories, modern research has identified two prominent theories that conflict with those in use in the public sector. They are:

1. That we are intrinsically motivated – the vast majority of us come to work wanting to do a good job. (according to Fredrick Hetzberg "if you want people to do a good job, give them a good job to do") If we apply extrinsic motivators such as bonuses, targets, punishments, etc. we actually demotivate our staff. We damage the inherent intrinsic motivation of the individual. As this may be counterintuitive to our understanding, it is worth viewing Dan Pink's explanation of the research in this excellent 11 minute animate video on the RSA site. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6XAPnuFjJc

2. That it is the design of the system in which people are asked to work that is the major determinant of outcomes. It is not the diligence and competence of the individual. Systems thinkers estimate that 80-95% of the outcomes are determined by the design of the system. There is a short 5 minute video from Vanguard which shows a young sales manager going through the learning process of coming to terms with this recognition. – see http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=bcdahNIu820

Over the past 20 years there have been numerous successful projects and interventions based on the above two assumptions. Basically they focus on the design of the system and then involve those at the work face and the customer to secure a more streamlined and cost effective design. They have achieved remarkable results.

A prominent consultancy working in this area at present is Vanguard Consulting. The Petition's committee are already in possession of a report on the many Vanguard projects that have secure remarkable improvements.