THE KAFKA BRIGADE
PUBLIC MANAGEMENT THEORY IN PRACTICE

Abstract: this paper reflects on the experiences of the Kafka Brigade in tackling bureaucratic dysfunction through action research. It discusses the origins and evolution of the Kafka approach, provides a case study of its application, and considers some lessons of this practical experience for remedying bureaucratic dysfunction and with regard to public management theory. This paper is thus not a traditional academic offering; we are sharing an approach that is a product of our imperfect experiences, as a small contribution to wider learning on public management for public value.

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INTRODUCTION

The Kafka Brigade is an independent, non-profit action research team, comprising a network of action researchers from Amsterdam and the Hague (NL), Boston (USA), Northern Ireland and Wales (UK). Our mission is to tackle the bureaucratic dysfunction which prevents people from accessing the services they need, and which constrains and frustrates public service staff. Our projects often focus on the most vulnerable groups in society, for whom accessing public services is vitally important , and a matter of social justice: children at risk, victims of domestic violence, migrants, the chronically ill, former offenders. Over the past five years, we have led more than fifty projects for government agencies across the Netherlands and extending to the United Kingdom in 2008/09.

This paper describes how we are developing an approach to tackling bureaucratic dysfunction through action research, as a contribution to wider learning about public value, public organisations and public leadership. Our goal in this paper is to document and reflect on the programme of work to date — which continues as a work in progress — and to formulate some precise questions for further discussion and research. We pose the following questions:

I.   How have we conceived, designed and implemented the Kafka approach to bureaucratic dysfunction?

II.   What practical lessons have we learnt about remedying bureaucratic dysfunction?

III.   What lessons have we learnt with regard to public management theory?

These questions are relevant because governments are in need of analytical and practical tools to make progress on a wide range of intractable issues. While insightful, much of the current public management literature on offer lacks practical usability; for practitioners, it's not clear what you *do* with it. We will answer the questions we have set by:

I.   Describing the Kafka approach, and explaining its design with reference both to insights from public management literature and from our own trial and error process.

II. Presenting a case study of a Kafka project that illustrates how the approach is applied in practice, and the practical and theoretical issues that emerge. This case study exemplifies Kafka projects to date, sharing many features present in other cases around both the issues to be addressed and the conditions in the system.

III. Discussing the lessons from our action research projects vis-à-vis some key general theories on public management and leadership.

The Kafka approach is a work in progress. We are learning and adapting our actions with every project, seeking to improve as we go. This paper is thus not a traditional academic offering; we are sharing an approach that is a product of our imperfect experiences, as a small contribution to wider learning on public management for public value.

CONTEXT AND DISCOURSE

The Kafka approach was initially developed in the Netherlands as a practical approach to shift services to become more citizen centred. We started with action research, to learn about bureaucratic dysfunction in detail from the user perspective and to help tackle it at the same time. Action research can be described as a family of research methodologies which pursue action (or change) and research (or understanding) at the same time (Dick 1991). Ideally this is done through cyclical or spiral processes which alternate between action and critical reflection. While our developmental process has been messier than that, we have continuously made efforts to refine methods, data and interpretation in the light of our developing understanding of bureaucratic dysfunction. Action research requires proximity to the object of study (Reason and Bradbury 2004, Stringer 2007): only when you engage with the subject matter will it reveal its nature and inform you on how best to study it. We found this highly applicable to the diagnosis of bureaucratic dysfunction.

Moreover, our goal was to contribute to change through our research - and to test if change is more successful when those affected are involved. This led us to develop a participatory research approach, focused on collaborative inquiry with practitioners *and* with affected citizens. While inspired by our experiences, our fieldwork, and by thought leaders in public management and leadership

theory, we deliberately tried to keep an agnostic mindset on the causes and effects of dysfunction. We were not led by any particular theoretical framework, although we were aware that many different theoretical perspectives would be helpful in interpreting the bureaucratic conundrums we came across. After 18-24 months, we began to recognise that the patterns we were finding through our empirical research were also reflected in some academic frameworks - particularly those which formulated challenges in public management and leadership at a higher level of abstraction, and emphasised the general nature of the work, rather than making claims about causes and effects. In this section, we discuss the frameworks that have emerged as most useful to us in further tackling bureaucratic dysfunction.

Bureaucratic Dysfunction as a loss of Public Value

Bureaucratic dysfunction is hard to define theoretically without resorting to one or a few partial perspectives (De Jong and Rizvi 2008). In day to day life, however, we certainly know it when we see it. Some have argued that our understanding of the phenomenon originates from personal negative encounters with bureaucracy (Herzfeld 1992). Certainly as Crozier (1964) identified, in an attempt to be both rational and egalitarian, bureaucracies attempt to anticipate every outcome and invent rules in advance to provide fair or appropriate access. These efforts are bound to fail, according to Crozier, because to minimise the negative effects of over-regulation, bureaucracies tend to regulate even more, creating vicious circles of red tape and reducing the room for public servants to act.

From an ousider's perspective, bureaucratic dysfunction occurs when services fail to meet policy objectives or to deliver value for money, particularly for vulnerable people. The Ombudsman service in the Netherlands has noted that cases that are brought to their attention are increasingly complex, owing to the involvement (or lack thereof) of many different agencies (Nationale Ombudsman 2008-9). In Wales, where we have supported five projects to date, bureaucratic dysfunction was singled out in a high profile government inquiry, the Beecham Review. In his conclusion, entitled "principles for citizen-centred service delivery", Beecham summarised the challenges for Welsh public services as "organisational culture, capacity and complexity" (Beecham, 2006). As a recently devolved administration in the UK, Wales has a similar public service profile to most developed countries, and these challenges are recognisable internationally.

Bureaucratic dysfunction manifests itself as a loss of public value. Individual citizens suffer from red tape, catch-22 situations and poor performance by government in general. Society at large suffers, because bureaucratic dysfunction prevents government from adequately addressing social problems. It is important to note that the Kafka Brigade does not merely focus on the welfare loss or justice loss

of individuals, but that it uses the experiences of individuals as an entry point into a discussion about what the public value loss for society is. Mark Moore's theory of Creating Public Value has helped us further conceptualise this.

Moore (1995) provides public service 'entrepreneurs' with a framework to rethink what the work of public management is about. He starts with the premise that if the role of the private sector is to create *private value*, then the role of the public sector must be to create *public value*. While acknowledging the important role of political leadership and governance, Moore points out that in a private sector enterprise we expect managers to have ideas about how to create value for their organisations. He promotes the idea that public service managers are just as entitled to create 'public value propositions' as their counterparts in the private sector are to create customer value propositions. This public value proposition forms the first leg of what Moore calls his 'strategic triangle', a strategic management device by which public sector managers can check the extent to which they are engaged in an activity that is valuable, authorised and deliverable.

The second leg of Moore's strategic triangle is the authorising environment through which the public manager gets and maintains 'legitimacy and support'. Having decided on a public value proposition that justifies the use of resources, the next requirement is to have the proposition authorised. The authorising environment consists of those people who can say yes or no to the 'public value proposition'; in today's networked public service organisations, such accountability quickly stretches beyond organisational boundaries to reach partner agencies, citizen forums, and the political level. There are then other elements in the authorising environment - people who can influence those who say 'yes' or 'no' to ideas - bringing into play other organisations such as the media, staff associations,, special interest groups and the tax payer. Having obtained authorisation, the public manager then needs to maintain it through the delivery phase.

The third (delivery) dimension of creating public value, according to Moore, is for the public manager to ensure s/he has sufficient operating capacity to deliver the public value proposition that has been authorised. The relationship between the public value proposition and capacity is symbiotic: value will only be achieved if the outcome can be delivered. There's no point promising what can't be delivered nor of delivering something not authorised . At the same time, Moore urges public managers to regard the boundary of their own organisations and traditional modus operandi as very different to the boundary of their operating capacity: a public manager who can enlarge their operating capacity well beyond their own organisation will be able to deliver much more public value. Partnerships,

whether traditional or innovative, formal or informal, can all bring a greater delivery capacity to bear on a problem.
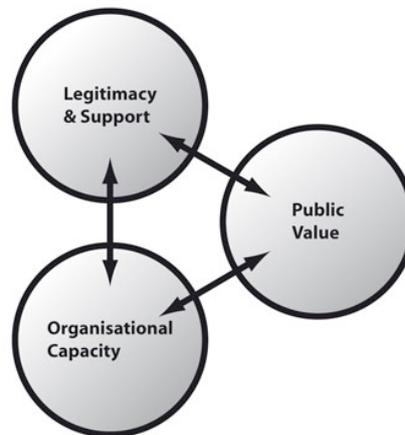
Creating public value: the strategic triangle

The strategic triangle may seem a simplified representation of real life, but when applied in the concrete circumstances, it helps make sense of the various constraints on public managers and provides an analytical framework to develop strategies. In our work, we have found the strategic triangle invaluable as a ready reckoner for public managers. Like a hill-walker's compass, the strategic triangle helps to make sure our overall work, and each step, is helping us to travel in the right direction.

Bureaucratic Dysfunction as a Symptom of Wicked Problems

As we have discussed above, bureaucratic dysfunction is more than an inconvenience to individual citizens. The role of public management is not only to deliver goods, services and obligations to clients, but do so in a way that ultimately serves society. This implies that dysfunction should not only be assessed and addressed in terms of failure to serve a single client, but also be considered in the context of wider public policy aims. For example, if the government fails to help a school dropout (or 'NEET' in the UK) to find a proper pathway, it is not just the dropout who suffers: a high number of dropouts is detrimental to society at large. In our projects, we make sure that the cases we study are emblematic of a larger group, around which there is a reasonable suspicion that the dysfunction affects both that group, and society at large. In many cases, this approach has led us to what are commonly called 'wicked' or 'intractable' social problems.

Intractable problems and bureaucratic dysfunction often go hand in hand. A problem persists because we haven't figured out an adequate response. And we haven't found an adequate response because we're struggling with the nature and size of the problem. Typically, the Kafka Brigade is contacted by a senior public service leader who recognises that performance is poor or worsening, but is not sure why or what action to take to counteract the trend. There is usually a complex array of symptoms, and often the problem has been escalated to a very senior level, because there is no obvious place for it to be managed lower down in the bureaucracy's hierarchy.

All of these factors are characteristic of a wicked problem (**Grint** 2005): there is no agreement on the nature of the problem, and certainly no clear view on what interventions might work to resolve it. To take another example, when we have undertaken projects on services for school drop-outs - as we have done both in the UK and the Netherlands - we have consistently uncovered widely varying perspectives on the purpose of these services, why they are under-performing, and what the most effective course of action might be. These are differences of values, of management, of policy and they can all be found within a dysfunctional delivery system.

Grint's heuristic offers two other types of problem alongside wicked ones. 'Tame' problems are ones managers recognise and for which they have an existing set of responses; they can respond in management mode, implementing a technical solution that they are confident will work. For the third category, the 'crisis', Grint argues that directive leadership (command) is demanded: people need to feel *someone* has the answers, and are happy to take instructions for as long as the crisis lasts. For a public manager, a crisis can also suddenly and dramatically afford permission for actions that may be less acceptable in more 'normal' circumstances. For example, politicians and the public are more likely to accept, even welcome, security measures that they perceive will make their families safer in the wake of a terrorist incident. Crisis situations are finite, they demand (perceived) decisive action, and they create a window of opportunity for more radical shifts than society usually allows. While Kafka projects typically target wicked problems, demanding leadership, the work can be triggered by a crisis that generates the authorisation for working on the issue.

Grint argues that making progress on wicked problems requires the exercise of leadership. Rather than assume control, the work for a leader facing a wicked problem is asking powerful questions, not assuming s/he knows the answers. As the Kafka Brigade, we do not start a project promising a particular outcome. Instead, we commit to leading a client community through a structured process to help to diagnose and address the wicked problem and bureaucratic dysfunction. Again, aligned to

Grint (2009), Kafka projects do not result in elegant blueprints for perfect future services; we deal in clumsy solutions, stitching together whatever is at hand from within the community to ensure practical success.

The Kafka Brigade certainly addresses wicked problems, to which bureaucratic dysfunction is a significant contributing factor. Both Moore and Grint's frameworks are thus useful tools in our action research projects. We offer four further shared characteristics of wicked problems in the public realm:

I.   Concreteness and significance: both citizens and public servants experience concrete, significant problems related to bureaucratic rules and processes. The problems imply larger problems for society.

II.   Uncertainty and opacity: it's not clear what the problem is - and it's probably multifaceted.

III. Multiplicity of organisations: when understood in its entirety, the problem transcends organisational boundaries.

IV.   Intractability: the problem has persisted, usually over many years - and/or there is an apparent lack of problem solving capacity. The presenting symptom is that efforts to resolve the problem have not helped, and sometimes have exacerbated it.

Bureaucratic Dysfunction as an Adaptive Problem

As action researchers, we try to help address the problems facing citizens and services, as well as diagnosing them. The Kafka approach mobilises the knowledge and potential for change within networks of organisations and professionals. It is a way to diagnose problems, to galvanise change *and* to deliver concrete improvements. As such, the Kafka approach also has much in common with "adaptive leadership" as defined by **Heifetz (1995)**.

Heifetz's definition of adaptive challenges is similar to Grint's wicked problems. Given their complex, contested nature, adaptive challenges require public managers to engage in the exercise of leadership. Heifetz emphasises that as well as a lack of agreement about the nature of the situation and of the solution, there is often a gap between the expressed values, beliefs and attitudes of a community (or organisation) and their behaviours in practice. Adaptive leadership and the Kafka approach both acknowledge and address this gap. As it deals with personal values and beliefs, tackling this gap can create distress and the ability to "maintain people within their productive zone of distress" (Heifetz & Linksy 2002) becomes crucial.

If culture or behaviours are part of the problem, the people with the problem must work on the change, or any technical solution will be temporary at best. The adaptive leader therefore resists the

temptation to solve the problem for the community, and gives the work back to the people who really own it. S/he concentrates instead on creating and maintaining a "holding environment" within which changes can be made (Heifetz & Linksy 2002). It may be useful to think of this holding environment as the cooking pot or pressure cooker within which the transformative work of turning ingredients into dinner takes place. Simply putting the ingredients into the pot will not produce dinner the pot needs to be placed on the stove and heated up – long enough and hot enough to cook the meal. No heat, no dinner - too much heat, no dinner as the pot will explode. Unusually for action researchers, through the Kafka approach we do not supply client organisations with 'answers' to their problems; instead we create the conditions in which public servants themselves identify and implement solutions.

In summary, the theoretical frameworks of Moore, Grint and Heifetz & Linksy provide us with further tools to inform both the Kafka Brigade's empirical research and our intervention actions. The Kafka approach does not however constitute a research method; it is an approach, which draws on what we have found most useful in our empirical research and then across public management literature. We also consciously undertake research, reflecting on the work undertaken using the Kafka Approach (De Jong, Zuurmond, 2007, 2008; De Jong and Rizvi 2008).

THE KAFKA BRIGADE APPROACH

The Kafka approach comprises, at its simplest, a case-based collaborative inquiry method to identify structural failures and gaps in current policy delivery, and adaptive leadership techniques to galvanise action to address those failures from within the system.
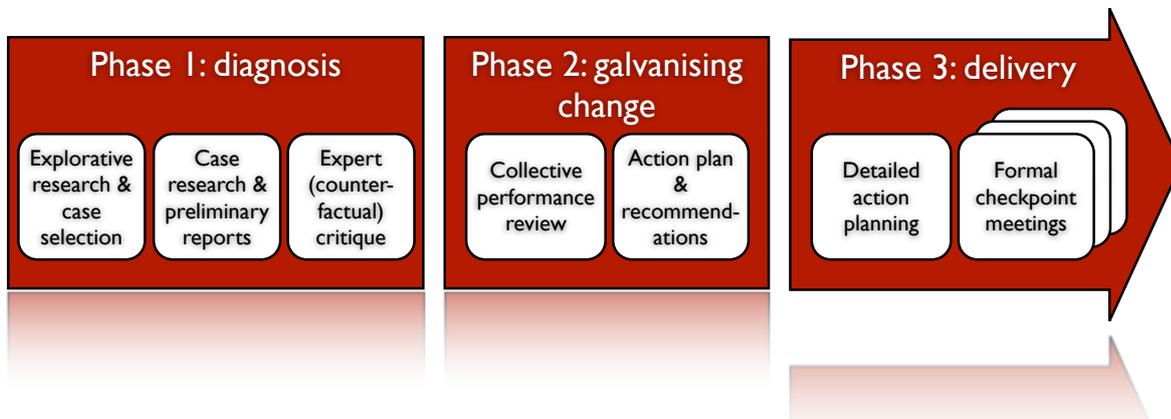
Our preferred way of working is to create a small cross-agency team of staff from relevant services, and to coach that team to apply the Kafka approach. We don't teach theory up front. This may seem counter-intuitive, but in our experience we are working with practitioners who want to address problems in the services they provide: they want to make a practical difference, now. Often they feel under real pressure too. They know something's wrong, and worry about fixing it. An approach that can help them to diagnose what's going wrong (and what's working), can target actions and get multi-agency commitment, all in three to four months, is attractive.

We have simplified and prioritised the theoretical base into five core principles that we introduce at the start of a project, and which we return to regularly. Our principles are:

I.   *Putting the citizen front and centre while involving all stakeholders.* To understand the roots of excessive bureaucracy, the Kafka Brigade involves all stakeholders, starting with the citizens who bear the burden of conflicting and disjointed or fragmented delivery and working in to front-line workers and up to their managers, their senior executives, and policy officials. We involve everyone in both analysing the problem, and in identifying solutions.

II. *No action without reflection, no reflection without action.* The Kafka approach is grounded in robust academic research: public value (Mark H Moore), Adaptive Leadership (Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky), and Tame/Wicked/Critical (Keith Grint). These theories all point to the need for public managers to engage critically in the challenges facing them: slavishly following a 'process' or method is unlikely to work. The Kafka Brigade always builds in reflection time throughout projects to understand cause and effect, to plan the next steps and to maximise learning.

III. *Rules are necessary, but may be implemented much better.* Laws, rules and procedures: they're necessary for well-functioning and fair government. But certain rules and procedures can undermine the effectiveness of others or, over time, unintentionally give rise to altogether new problems. The Kafka Brigade excels at helping public organisations and civil society cut through unnecessary, problematic or outdated red tape.

IV. *Under the radar.* During projects, the Kafka Brigade flies under the radar, avoiding public launches and media exposure during the work. This discrete approach provides our teams with the space to reflect honestly and constructively on current practices and behaviours, together and to develop solutions without being subjected to distorting media pressure, messages or timelines. Once this has been done and there are successes, that is the time to promote and publicise the work in partnership with the citizens and the public servants.

V.   *Creating a safe environment: public servants are part of the solution.* Critical reflection and creative problem solving flourish in an environment where individuals are commended for their honesty and supported for their willingness to put forward new ideas and challenge each other's assumptions. With this truth in mind, the Kafka Brigade strives to provide a safe yet stimulating environment for all project participants. We also recognise that it's the people in the system that will deliver any success - not us: public servants are part of the solution.

THE KAFKA APPROACH

The Kafka approach itself is presented very simply:

Phase 1: diagnosis			Phase 2: galvanising change		Phase 3: delivery	
Explorative research & case selection	Case research & preliminary reports	Expert (counter-factual) critique	Collective performance review	Action plan & recommend-ations	Detailed action planning	Formal checkpoint meetings

The Kafka approach: process view

PHASE ONE - DIAGNOSIS

Step 1: Explorative research & case selection

The Brigade begins by conducting an initial appraisal of the problem. Firstly, we scope out the current understanding of the problem, and why the current situation has arisen. This is a qualitative exercise, drawing on the knowledge and insights of key contacts. Secondly, we build a fresh picture of the people - usually the service users - the project is aimed at assisting, by drawing together quantitative research and management information from across all relevant agencies. At the end of step 1, we therefore have a first cut perception of the problem, and a statistical profile of the people involved.

Step 2: Case research & preliminary reports

Next, we seek to understand the problem more deeply from the citizen / service user perspective. We conduct a detailed investigation of the needs and delivery experience of a small number of people (often just one or two) who statistically are typical of the population in focus. This step involves detailed interviews with citizens and dossier analysis. Three preliminary reports are prepared: (i) the citizen's story, sometimes accompanied by a short movie-interview; (ii) a step by step 'flow chart' of the citizen's interactions with services; and (iii) an early set of hypotheses and list of emerging issues.

Step 3: Expert critique of the preliminary analysis

The purpose of this step is to test the representativeness of the issues identified so far with another key source of expertise: front line staff. Where issues are validated, we then explore what's causing

them, directly and indirectly, again with front line staff but also with managers, senior executives, policy makers and other experts as needed. By the end of the step, we have a deeper understanding of key issues, and are ready to trigger creative, collaborative problem solving.

PHASE TWO - GALVANISING CHANGE

Step 4: Collective performance review (CPR)

By step 4, it's time to bring everyone with a stake in solving the problem together. The collective performance review is a carefully planned and facilitated workshop bringing together everyone necessary to address the issues identified in the same place, at the same time - members of the public, front line staff, managers, policy professionals, politicians and other concerned parties. The meeting is moderated to ensure that all participants are engaged, focused and committed to solving the problem. Not by talking about grand (re)designs, or simply pointing fingers or blaming the system, but by formulating small first steps. The three outcomes of this meeting are, respectively, to (i) arrive at a shared definition of the problem, (ii) identify and explore possible solutions, and (iii) agree on an initial set of corrective actions which will lay the foundation for a broader, more systemic remedy. These actions are owned and commitment is reaffirmed.

Step 5: Final recommendations & action plan

We package the agreed actions from the CPR, plus the Kafka Brigade team's recommendations and observations, into a concise, high impact action plan. Usually the CPR has galvanised the system and identified a range of actions that will really make a difference to the citizens in our sights, but a strategy is then needed to maintain constructive pressure and to drive action on more complex or strategic ideas emerging from the project. Crucially, we also consider how to monitor the impact of the action plan, too.

PHASE THREE - DELIVERY

Step 6: Follow up

We co-design follow-up support with you during the earlier phases, based on our joint assessment of the barriers to change, local capacity, and the complexity of actions. Key elements include: (i) action owners workshop(s) in which the people who made commitments in the CPR are assisted to work through how they will deliver; (ii) coaching and/or reflection support to the project sponsor and core team to maintain pace and constructive pressure; (iii) a formal checkpoint meeting, 3 to 6 months after the action plan - to hold the system to account collectively for delivery and to remove barriers

where action owners may be struggling. Have outcomes improved, tangibly? Have services improved? The checkpoint is again a carefully prepared event, so that the time spent together can be as productive as possible. All three of these follow up mechanisms can be repeated, with consultancy support reducing over time, until significant improvements and innovations have delivered real change for citizens.

THE CASE OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SERVICES IN WALES

In the Autumn of 2008, senior public service executives in Rhondda Cynon Taff (RCT), Wales, met at their regular Board event to discuss local priorities. The chief police officer had a burning concern to raise. According to his statistics, more and more women were being violently attacked in their homes, particularly in the days following international rugby matches. Fellow Board members were shocked. What was going on? What could be done? The conversation was charged, and a shared commitment to act emerged quickly. But what precisely was wrong with current services? And what could they each do in their organisations to make rapid improvements?

The RCT Board engaged the Kafka Brigade to work with them to identify the problems with services aimed at supporting domestic violence victims, and to create a joint action plan which could deliver change quickly.

PHASE ONE - DIAGNOSIS

Step 1: Explorative research & case selection
Firstly, we needed to understand who was suffering from domestic violence (DV) in the area. Using existing data, we identified the local DV population known to services, and then analysed their characteristics to build a profile of the typical DV victim. We discovered that the typical victim was a single mother in her twenties, often unemployed, suffering multiple incidents of abuse usually in the home - and that there were at least 2000 women in the local area meeting this profile. Moreover, the majority of victims' children had witnessed abuse and, most shockingly, that victims were pregnant during 81% of incidents.

We then identified a young woman among those 2000 who was willing to share her story, particularly focusing on her experience of public services during the period of her abuse. Sarah (not her real name) is a caring and supportive mother of two young children who had suffered two abusive

partners in the previous four years, and multiple violent incidents leading to broken bones and a miscarriage. Sarah had also taken each man to court, resulting in successful convictions.

Step 2: Case research & preliminary reports

Sarah's story revealed dysfunction in a number of services, plus a range of systemic failures. Dysfunctionality, where procedures or guidelines were in place but not working properly, included failure of medical staff to assess for DV and to make referrals, failure to provide protective options and support during the court process, and failure to prevent a perpetrator from harassing Sarah from jail. Systemic failures, stemming from well intentioned policies and arrangements, included a refusal to rehouse Sarah as a DV victim in the local area despite her children attending school nearby, a reliance on leaflets as the mechanism to offer support to DV victims, and significant under-provision in services for the children caught up in domestic violence.

Step 3: Expert critique of the preliminary analysis

All of these issues were recognised and further explained during interviews with front line staff across the police, health service, council and voluntary organisations. This counter-factual analysis provided us with the opportunity to confirm that the issues were typical, and to begin to explore both their root causes and why they had not been addressed.

PHASE TWO - GALVANISING CHANGE

Step 4: Collective performance review

By March 2009, we had built a sufficient understanding of where and why services in RCT were failing typical DV victims that we could to move into the next phase of work: galvanising change. On a bright Spring morning, sixty people gathered in Ystrad leisure centre in the Rhondda. Most importantly, Sarah attended ready to share her story; alongside her were the Council's political leader and a Welsh government minister. On the first row were front line staff who could testify to the problems they dealt with day to day, and behind them sat their senior executives who held the responsibility to create the conditions in which the best service possible can be delivered. Everyone needed to fix the problems in hand was present.

In the first half of the collective performance review, our moderator interviewed Sarah about her experiences, reminding the audience that she was typical of 2000 women in the area. As Sarah explained the challenges she had faced, the support she had hoped for and the support she had received, the tension in the room built: each senior executive realised that at least some of the failures

"were on their watch". As well as a responsibility to Sarah, and to the women she represented, executives felt an additional pressure because the political leaders present would now want to hear what action would be taken.

In the second half of the collective performance review, we provided the executives with an opportunity to relieve that pressure by making specific commitments to action. The floodgates opened, and a long list of commitments were made. The collective performance review had created a space in which the rational, emotional and political cases for action came together and enabled executives to respond to the case for action constructively.

Sarah commented at the end of the day: "if you could just do what you promised to do today, that would make a real difference for women like me". The local domestic violence co-ordinator exclaimed: "what you did today was priceless".

Step 5: Final recommendations & action plan
The commitments made at the collective performance review were rapidly documented in a formal Kafka action plan. The plan linked each action to the original problem, so that the project would not fall into the trap of monitoring activity rather than outcomes.

PHASE THREE - DELIVERY

Step 6: Follow up
In RCT, the local team took enthusiastic ownership of delivery. The Kafka Brigade role was to assist in maintaining the pressure to deliver through regular checkpoint meetings. The Board that had commissioned the project felt they had overall responsibility and so wanted independent facilitation to help to hold each other to account. Again, the checkpoint meetings were tightly designed and moderated, with the aim of encouraging pace, pulling focus back to DV victims' priorities, and using the authority of the Board to remove barriers to progress where they emerged.

Agencies across RCT have implemented the majority of the commitments they made last March. The core team is now gathering and reviewing performance data to assess what impact the actions have had to the actual service experience of domestic violence victims locally. Recognising that the commitments made in 2009 would address a large number of problems, but were never expected to achieve a perfect service, a second phase of actions is already swinging into place - including the analysis of a second typical case with a neighbouring area. The work goes on!

LESSONS LEARNT

Through the work of the Kafka Brigade, we have learnt a huge amount - and continue to learn - about the nature of modern bureaucracies, dysfunction and transformation.

What practical lessons have we learnt about remedying bureaucratic dysfunction?
Kafka Brigade projects lead to actions on three levels: the individual, the group and the bureaucratic system. Most actions to improve outcomes for the individual and group can be owned locally - and as such are most likely to be delivered. Actions to change rules or systems are harder to deliver and demand change by more distant, more traditional bureaucratic 'rational' cultures.

A single Kafka project is unlikely to deliver sustainable change. The Kafka approach introduces people to diagnosis and change from the citizen perspective, and to techniques to tackle wicked problems and lead adaptively. All of these are very different from normal service management routines and boundaries, which are reinforced by reporting requirements, performance targets, social norms and expectations. A particular frustration for us, because it is so deeply ingrained in many public organisations, is the high value put on process management. Most public managers need deeper immersion and training in the Kafka approach and the underpinning frameworks, starting by re-conceptualising their work, before they can apply it meaningfully without external support.

Where multiple bureaucracies are involved, typically no one agency or person has strategic responsibility for delivery. In the UK, 'co-ordinator' roles have blossomed in recognition of this issue. Co-ordinators however are usually locally based, relatively junior managers who rely on their power to convene; in our experience, they rarely have the authority (or the skills) to tackle what are some of the toughest, cross-cutting, wicked problems in today's public services. Sustainable action on wicked issues demands a rethinking of the role of some strategic managers, their responsibilities and accountabilities.

In the meantime, dysfunctional bureaucracies often exhibit two phenomena which we have witnessed to a greater or smaller extent on every project we have worked on: front line risk taking, and learned helplessness in management. Some front-line staff, when faced day to day with people in real need, go beyond their authorised remits to help. They do so with limited management cover - sometimes deliberately because they know their managers would be compelled to stop them from doing what

they feel is right – and they feel exposed. These front line staff are being entrepreneurial to help citizens, but on a case by case basis and without that feeding into improvement because of its under-the-radar nature. Such risk taking can be characterised as 'high risk – low return' because the risks are taken to benefit individual service users, rather than larger groups. Conversely, middle managers can draw tight boundaries around their areas of responsibility as a response to (perceived) volumes of work, or complexity. These boundaries are usually in line with organisational borders, rarely around citizen needs. Creating the conditions in which managers feel both confident and obligated to move outside their boundaries is a key element to a successful Kafka project.

Lastly, in the course of 50+ Kafka projects, we have consistently been inspired by the people we work with. Part of our approach is to 'give permission' to public servants across the system, at every level, to be brutally honest about the current situation and correspondingly to innovate new responses. There are always "leaders from below" (Heifetz & Linksy, 2002) whose insights and actions make a real difference to the people they serve - and whose ideas can be replicated for the group and the system.

What lessons have we learnt with regard to public management theory?
While civil servants sometimes wear organisational blinkers, academics can sometimes wear disciplinary blinkers. From a clear, agnostic action research starting point, we have found that a number of public management frameworks can usefully inform research and improvement work in practice - in a number of combinations. We may never have found some of the frameworks however if we had too religiously adopted only one of them. We are now committed to more systematic and comparative research on the results of these action research projects, to further investigate this initial finding.

As the Kafka approach has evolved, we have incorporated statistical analysis and collaborative research into a case-based action research approach. We have done so 'clumsily': well enough for the issues in hand, but there is now a need to revisit the design of this work for maximum rigour. Similarly, we need to do more longitudinal studies on the sustainability and impact of these action research projects to inform future work.

An important reassurance comes from Grint's conceptualisation of clumsy solutions. So often academics propose elegant, abstract ideas which practitioners then struggle to use. Grint's work is intellectually demanding - particularly in terms of the social construction of problems - but also liberating in suggesting that for many problems a unilinear, mechanical, process of problem solving is at best sub-optimal and at worst deeply dysfunctional. Indeed, we have found that applying any set of

theoretical approaches in a 'text book manner' is nigh on impossible in the dynamic environment of public management. Instead, recognising and celebrating clumsy solutions allows us to value actions that lead to *better* (rather than perfect) outcomes, and to learn from the experience.

Lastly, while time pressures limit practitioners' capacity for reflection, reflection is fundamental to improving practice. We have found that Heifetz's ideas about moving between the balcony and the dance floor resonates with practitioners; this is sticky knowledge, easy to transfer and put into practice. We have particularly observed practitioners reflecting from Heifetz's balcony on the authorising environment which enables or inhibits their efforts to create public value (Moore).

CONCLUSION

The Kafka approach is a work in progress, and our reflections are offered here as a modest contribution to wider learning about public value, public sector organisations and public leadership. We recognise and appreciate the importance of academic specialisation; the gauntlet we pick up is to help pressured practitioners to use action research and academic ideas in practice.

The Kafka Brigade's 50+ projects have offered insights into tackling bureaucratic dysfunction in practice, and we have sought to mesh bottom-up agnostic case research findings with overarching public management theories into an approach which is both useful and useable to practitioners. This work, and reflection, continues; some questions we think are most interesting now are:

I. How might the Kafka approach be 'scaled up', and applied successfully to a system, or set of services?

II. How can we more tightly wrap personal development (introduction to the academic ideas) around practical project delivery?

III. What lessons are emerging from the Kafka experiences on sustainable improvement of bureaucracies?

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