# The State of Transformation – Where are we at and where are we going?

The Public Sector Show is partnering with the Public Service Transformation Academy on their project to identify the current state and key drivers of transformation. The report of this process will be published alongside a conference in May and the PSTA will have a presence and a panel discussion at the Public Sector Show in June. Here, Benjamin Taylor, the Chief Executive of the PSTA and public service transformation consultancy RedQuadrant (its lead organisation), gives us a sneak preview of the emerging themes.

Transformation. It's one of those power words, like leadership, community, engagement, outcomes. They sound good, so they get added to 'sell' lots of initiatives or projects, but they are overused and often meaningless. So, over time, 'transformation' has become degraded. And besides, nobody really agrees what it means anyway – and everyone tends to see it through their own specialist lens. 'Transformation is all about digital', 'it's about agile and smart working', 'it's about community empowerment'. Except they don't say it, because to them, it's blindingly obvious, and they can't imagine it meaning anything else.

At the PSTA, we feel a responsibility to understand what is really happening, to define what might happen, to recommend what those who really care about public service transformation should be doing. Our survey went out to hundreds of practitioners including our Commissioning Academy, Leading Transformation, and Service Transformation Programme alumni, and the results are fascinating. In May, we'll be publishing a report with the overview of the findings, essays by thought leaders including many Chief Executives as well as citizens with experience as 'service users', and case studies of some of the best examples we've found. We'll launch these at our landmark conference in May, and look forward to further discussions at the Public Sector Show in June.

So, what have we found? Well, we've found that true leaders of transformation need to balance what we call the 'five worlds' of transformation – that action needs to be taken in leadership and management, in organisation/service delivery, in learning and change, and reaching out into citizen world. We use a map I created in RedQuadrant to help to navigate this:
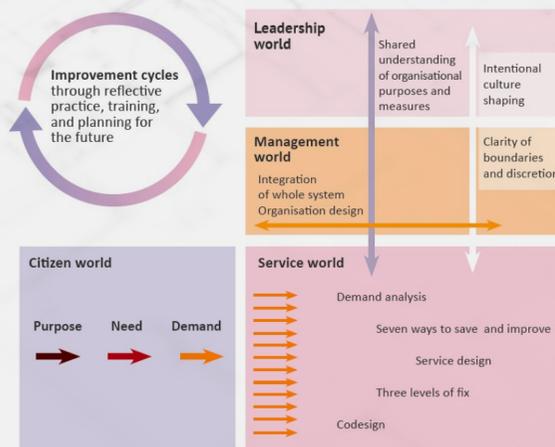
In the world of learning, improving, reflecting, the key factors are:

- Learning lessons – including from our optimism bias and structures that create transformation projects that are 'doomed to succeed' – and sharing this knowledge
- Learning to use small trials and iterations with good design to counter this and make change work
- Understanding markets as being good servants and bad masters, and managing and thinking about unintended consequences and external shocks like "Brexit"
- Understanding and working with the implications of our structures – for example, the systemic way that central / local relationships work, learning to work collaboratively and steering increased public service integration
- And realising that, to achieve organisational transformation, you will have to go through a personal transformation – and it might not all be fun!

In the worlds of management and leadership, the key factors are:

- Our realisation that cultural issues are the major enablers and the overwhelming barriers to change – culture is the big determinant of success or failure, and leaders must accept their responsibility for the culture of their organisation. This means understanding that behaviour change applies to us – personally – and we need to think about the dynamics behind social movements as much as hard structures, funding etc
- This means a re-ignited conversation about ethics and genuinely protecting the vulnerable – including equality and diversity, and including proper mourning for what we have lost as the world changes.
- Ultimately, we need to reconnect people with a true role of public services. This might include what we've coined as 'public service disobedience' – standing up against what you know to be wrong and counterproductive, even at personal cost
- Adopting commercial mindset and thinking about income generation – balancing this with our public service ethos, but knowing it is about a way of thinking with commercial awareness, more than simply spinning off and trading parts of our organisations
- This means increasing public service productivity and understanding our contribution to the local economy – and our impact on it. Can we weigh up a hundred pounds of efficiency versus a hundred pounds of economic impact?
- Collaborating better across all kinds of boundaries, uniting around a shared public service ethos, and understanding that we need something like 'commissioning' to link and create proper feedback loops between 'policy' and 'delivery'
- In doing this, we have to be careful not to throw the 'baby out with the bathwater'. Discipline, hierarchy, well-functioning silos and professional values will be more important, not less. They just have to learn to exist in a networked, interdependent world

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In the world of organisation, structure, and service delivery, we see increases in the complexity of the tools we have available to meet the complexity of the world:

- We note the eternal recurrence of 'new delivery models' – mutuals, social enterprise, joint commissioning partnerships – and that, while these are usually seen as 'silver bullet' solutions, in fact they simply add to the public service tool box. Rather than solving our problems, they create new ways to surface inherent tensions and complexity
- Likewise, social investment, now creating (or making visible) a true 'mixed market' for public service funding as well as provision, brings out real complexity, makes the world a more complicated place, and gives us more room for manoeuvre, which can be overwhelming and distracting, but needs to be seen as empowering choice
- We need to take responsibility for the whole system (the whole 'five worlds' map), even if we are only formally responsible for a tiny part of it
- Digital and the supposed march of the 'bots' and AI provide just another part of the jigsaw, albeit a set of capabilities which, like the introduction of electricity, will infuse everything we do in the very near future

Finally and most importantly, in the world of citizens and communities:

- We are now looking at the harsh realities of austerity and cutting back right to the bone in some places – so we need to be very clear about what's 'core' to public service provision, and what we have to let go of. This must be a live, engaged debate with the public
- This means thinking about how we can still deliver – and refocus on – early help and early intervention, and reconsidering our 'universal offers' – breaking down our offer into small chunks and considering them independently won't work any more
- There is potential for social value and outcome focus to help recast this situation as not about 'more with less' but 'the best that can be achieved by all of us together with everything we've got'
- We are now thinking about the disabling aspects of the relationship between public services and citizens (or as we depersonalise them, 'service users'), and how we can turn this around
- At the heart of all of this is our relationship with citizens and communities. Their role is the most critical part of the equation – start by seeing all public services as 'co-created' – the citizen is involved. We will only succeed with real transformation if we start by seeing citizens and communities as truly equal partners.

All of this means recognising power dynamics, and giving away a lot of power. So, it gets harder. Thank God, we have some case studies that show this doesn't require superhuman, massive minds – it requires patience, learning, openness, determination, and getting the details right. Leaders now need to balance predictable, programmatic, sometimes very complicated technical change (optimising the use of resources, better procurement, waste reduction) with more complex, emergent, transformational, unpredictable change – prevention, enabling, getting it right first time – that necessarily involve coproduction with citizens.

What we can see clearly is that getting better outcomes for communities and citizens demands leaders and practitioners working collaboratively across organisational and professional boundaries.

To work together more effectively, the different professions that serve the public must first recognise that they inhabit different worlds – different ways of seeing, ways of being, different power dynamics, different languages. Then they have to learn each other's languages and create shared understanding. For example, social workers and technologists must translate sufficiently to ensure support systems are fit for purpose. Teachers and procurement professionals must understand enough of each other's worlds to ensure schools are equipped cost-effectively. Creating the conditions for this to happen is perhaps the prime task of system leadership.

Likewise, there are many disciplines contributing to transformation, including community engagement, customer insight, project management, procurement, process improvement, outcomes thinking, data analytics, digital, service design and innovation. So successful systems transformation is inherently and inevitably multi- and inter-disciplinary. Our mission is to bring these tools and techniques together coherently and accessibly to develop the capability of organisations to serve the public better.

public service transformation academy