

TYRANNY OR DEMOCRACY AT WORK?

HIT THE TARGET BUT MISS THE POINT!

Notes from Nottingham event February 2010

Let's create our own ways of managing

Conversation between academics and those involved in voluntary and community action at Nottingham Trent University on Saturday February 27th 2010

BACKGROUND

The National Coalition for Independent Action (NCIA) and Nottingham Trent University organised a SpeakEasy to talk about the impact of managerial practices and ideologies on voluntary action; and what to do about it. 19 people came and 19 people gave their apologies but said they want to be kept involved.

We divided our discussions into three chunks:

- the harm caused by managerial practices
- what we want to see instead
- what we can do to make this happen

We also looked at the NCIA pamphlet, which sets out the Coalition's position on managerialism. Comments about this, and from the discussions, have been used to produce the final pamphlet which will be put on the NCIA website and used as a basis for prompting debate and action.

THE HARM BEING DONE

The level of consensus amongst us, about the impact of managerial practices, was such that we spent most of the time talking about what we wanted instead and how to get it. The current status quo was nicely summed up by one comment: Hit the target but miss the point!

Other points made were:

- ♣ targets dehumanise, distract us from benefits for communities and individuals and take away the essence of our craft
- ♣ playing the game just reinforces a system we don't want
- ♣ current funding regimes act as a drug and create co-dependency
- top down requirements provide little opportunity for people at grassroots to influence real shape of what is delivered – despite the rhetoric of 'engagement', delivering better services, empowerment, inclusion.

There were examples of what this has meant for particular areas of voluntary action. For example, youth work is meant to be young people deciding what they want to do. But fixed outcomes, accreditation, formality and the obsession with anti-social agendas undermine

young people's self-determination. The results of this work are long term and uncertain, planting seeds with little knowledge of when or where it will germinate.

Throughout the day this point was also made: that 85% activity is unpaid voluntary activity. Managerialism only applies when public funding is involved. The rules being applied are public sector rules, which the bulk of the voluntary sector does not have capacity to deliver.

It is crucial to remember and stress the distinction between paid for service delivery (regulated) and unpaid community action (unregulated).

Lastly, we're not the only ones affected – staff in local authorities are also disgruntled.

WHAT WE WANT TO SEE INSTEAD

We talked about the need to create our own ways of managing, what this might look like and what we'd need to do to make this happen. The basic ingredients were:

- ♣ innovation, creativity and drive – putting the heart back
- ♣ voluntary action based on commitment to the cause, not on payment and professional codes
- ♣ managing social change as well as social services
- ♣ an acknowledgement of the long term nature of change
- ♣ the use of our power – to negotiate what we want
- ♣ our own commissioning plans and contracts
- ♣ our own structures, practices and systems
- ♣ a diverse funding base – to resource ourselves
- ♣ to push for grants not contracts.

To do this, we'll need to:

- ♣ get smarter about how we work and subvert the 'business paradigm' (know your enemy)
- ♣ encourage people to be courageous and say no to stupid funding regimes
- ♣ find our own language and stop using the terms and ideology of 'business'
- ♣ present alternatives – solutions that people can do or start working our own way, e.g. workers run co-ops
- ♣ influence strategic commissioning by involving individuals and groups earlier in the process

- refuse competitive tendering and urge others not to use these types of funding regime.

We will draw on a tactical tool chest which will contain examples of different services, how they are affected by regulation and of resistance and alternative models. The examples will inspire and help us to be brave; and provide practical help eg. examples of self-funding. The tool chest will have a range of tactical options which will include – principled exit, playing the game, driving wedges into weak spots and taking bite size chunks.

We will use all the resources available to us: activists, volunteers, our combined skills and knowledge. We will reach for co-operative action not competitive relationships. We will support each other emotionally, financially and legally so as to create solidarity between us. We will know the scene we are working within but won't accept its terms of reference, if this doesn't suit us. When required, we will say that the emperor has no clothes; and make visible and speak out about damaging or ineffective practices.

We will challenge the assumptions of national agencies – NAVCA, Volunteering England, NCVO – who are signed up to the compact to consider the results for their members; and to press them to more campaigning in representing their members.

We need the Robin Hood Centre at Nottingham Trent! A repeated theme through the day was a call for a critical research facility which produces materials and thinking which is understandable to both practitioners and academics – to gather current intelligence about the impact of managerial ideologies; to research and find evidence of alternative models; to link theory with practice; to explain our informal and theoretical understandings and experiences to each other.

To do this, we can build contacts with existing research centres eg: the Community Development Unit at North London University; Third Sector Research Centre; University of Bradford.

Practical help which academics might offer practitioners is 2 page summaries of research and other academic reports (eg recent UNISON report) which can be used in the field.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

The energy of people in the room was noted and the fact that there are not enough opportunities like today to be with people who share the same perspective. The event gives confidence to keep talking and keep the flame burning. It was agreed to maintain the links made as a result of the day. Several people said they will attend NCIA Assembly meetings, look at the NCIA website and get involved in Coalition work.

Participants said what they intended to do to tackle the issues discussed.

People involved in voluntary action

1. One agency said they would redraft all their job descriptions and trustees roles to reflect the distinct culture of voluntary and community action; and to avoid managerial practices and language. It was hoped that this would lead to a change in the organisation sector culture. They will tell NCIA what happens as a result.
2. Several people said they would raise the issues discussed with their local second tier organisations.
3. Others also said they would start raising the issues discussed, and what to do, with work colleagues, local groups, forums and regional networks.
4. One person said they would support groups they work with over the issues we have discussed, and help people to feel safe to discuss their work in this way – in particular, to identify evidence which will expose government policy shortcomings.
5. Several people made a commitment to be more vocal, assert – without rancour – the need for change and be explicit about what they want and upfront saying it.

People working in academic institutions

6. In Essex, they will bring groups together, have themed workshops and collect critical research which shows the impact of managerial practices.
7. One person said they would look at, and research, the different languages being used in the sector, how it is used and the underlying assumptions.

8. Another wanted to reflect on today's event, look for narratives and data, record what's said for research purposes and set up seminars for further debate.

9. In Nottingham, one academic said he will make his resources available to seek evidence for VCS needs, to work with NCIA and to further the connections being created between practitioners and academics.

NCIA

Participants said what they want NCIA to be and do. NCIA was likened to a "wedge" which, at the thin edge, if placed in the right place can exert a disproportionate impact.

What is NCIA?

- ♣ NCIA attracts individuals as well as organisations
- ♣ We are a network to support people speaking out
- ♣ We are a battalion of loose cannons.

NCIA needs to combine to engage at the right level :

- ♣ National (performance framework)
- ♣ Regional (strategic commissioning)
- ♣ Local (local strategic partnerships, comprehensive Area Assessment; Total Place.)

What should NCIA do?

- ♣ Continue! Do more of what it is doing!
- ♣ Create more opportunities to come together with this open flexible way of talking
- ♣ Continue to raise awareness: seek press exposure, continue to contact sympathetic academics, pursue mechanisms to engage & communicate, even internationally
- ♣ Get message out in different ways: social networks, media etc.
- ♣ Spell out the time which social change takes
- ♣ provide written summaries of what's happening
- ♣ Tell VCS about issues and dangers arising from the safeguarding agenda
- ♣ Challenge such agencies as NCVO/NAVCA to make independent action part of their work
- ♣ Challenge assumptions being made at all levels of government (treasury, government office, district and county councils).
- ♣ Approach funders with evidence to explain that the managerialist approach is 'so last century!'
- ♣ Receive thanks (Penny and Andy should receive thanks) for the fact that we are able to be in 'ungoverned space'.