



# **Collective Leadership: Where Nothing is Clear and Everything Keeps Changing**

**Exploring new territories for evaluation**  
Dr Cathy Sharp, November 2018



# Foreword

## Collective Leadership Context

We face a wide range of complex, wicked issues in Scotland, such as poverty, increasing inequalities and climate change. Progress in addressing these sorts of issues can feel slow and frustrating. Experience shows that many of our conventional models for leadership of change do not serve us well when it comes to complex, systemic issues.

The recent launch of a new set of National Outcomes for Scotland provides a compelling illustration of the rich array of cross-cutting and inter-related themes which come together to express an aspirational vision for Scotland.

The National Outcomes were developed through extensive engagement with the public, practitioners and experts on what kind of Scotland they would like to live in.

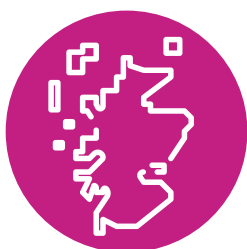
Work to deliver this kind of vision requires us to think and act collectively, fully recognising that achieving these outcomes cannot be achieved by any one organisation or agency on their own.

With all of this very much in mind, Collective Leadership for Scotland was launched at a Scottish Leaders Forum event in January 2018, which engaged participants in the question of “How can we build capacity for Collective Leadership for Scotland?”.

Collective Leadership for Scotland makes an offer of support and learning to people working with systemic issues which reach beyond the boundaries of traditional hierarchies and public institutions.

There is an emphasis on building capacity for leadership which appreciates and engages with the whole system, including the behavioural and relational aspects, and where openness, learning and willingness to take collective action are at the core.

## The core elements of Collective Leadership for Scotland include:



Working with real teams on real issues in real places. This leads to system learning and wider development of facilitative leadership skills.

We aim for direct work with 10-12 new multi-partner participant teams each year.

Highly skilled facilitation is critical to the work, creating an integral emphasis on learning as the work progresses. We offer a residential four day facilitator development programme every 6 months

to further develop the specific skills and capacity to work on complex issues with multi-partner teams, followed up with ongoing facilitation development and supervision.



Building in learning and evaluation from the start and sharing learning widely as we go develops our practice and builds capacity. Our approach includes an embedded emphasis on learning in our work with participant sites

through action inquiry, systematic investigation of our learning across the different elements of the programme, hosting peer learning events, conferences and activities, and our publication series.

Creating structured and regular opportunities for shared learning around the theories, models and practices which best support Collective Leadership helps participant teams to see the bigger picture and prepare well for the work. We offer taster sessions every month in a variety of locations across Scotland and

frequently contribute Collective Leadership components to a range of development sessions. We are prototyping an offer with partners for a two-day programme to introduce the theory and core elements of Collective Leadership to be delivered on a regular basis across public services.



A central premise of the work is that we must work collaboratively and collectively to affect change, and this work is often complex, messy, unpredictable, and difficult to achieve. Creating the time and space to work collectively can be challenging. The pressure of day to day work can override our best intentions and ability to build trusting relationships which enable us to reflect, challenge our current thinking and innovate together. We can get stuck in our traditional habits and ways of thinking and doing.

By seeking to work directly with real teams engaged in working with these realities as they seek to lead change, Collective Leadership for Scotland offers a highly bespoke support structure for the teams and for the wider changes they seek to achieve.

Collective Leadership for Scotland builds very explicitly from five years of previous work by Workforce Scotland - the Scottish Leaders Forum collaborative development body. It works with public services to collaborate on complex, systemic issues in service of wider public service transformation. It also draws upon developments from across public services which have themselves emerged from Workforce Scotland and are using similar approaches.

## “Navigation Aids” – the publication series

Learning through practice sits at the heart of Collective Leadership for Scotland. We are committed to developing a range of ways that colleagues and partners across the public service landscape can learn with us as we develop and grow our understanding of what enables Collective Leadership to happen.

We are keen that this work is informed and stretched by emerging action research evidence. This is gathered by the facilitators and participants within the Collective Leadership partnership teams and other relevant theoretical and practice-informed evidence by experts at home and worldwide. To do this, we are developing a Faculty drawn from authoritative voices in this field and a wider Collective Leadership Research and Practitioner Network.

We see the navigation aid publication series, of which this paper is the first, as an important component of sharing what is informing our understanding of facilitating the conditions for Collective Leadership and our practice within it. The series will be written in partnership with a diverse range of colleagues depending on the topics which, while not yet fully defined, are likely to cover a range of issues such as: What is Collective Leadership?, Working with Complexity, the Role of Facilitation, and Readiness. Other topics will emerge through our dialogue and work with partners.

Publications will be made available on the Workforce Scotland website as well as other sites, in a variety of formats and will routinely include an opportunity to engage around the themes and issues being raised before and after publication. For example, this paper was reviewed by a number of practitioners and researchers and then shared with a wider group so we could explore its material and uses together before publication.

## Why Start Here?

We are very excited to start our publication series, working with Dr Cathy Sharp, on Exploring New Territories for Evaluation. In starting here we intend to signal the critical importance of a strong focus on evaluation right from the outset of a programme of work. Just as with facilitating Collective Leadership, we are not stating that this is the only way to evaluate or that there is not a time and place for other forms of evaluation. Only that given the work we do within this programme, these new evaluation territories seem ripe for more in depth exploration when working in complexity towards elements of system change.

With this intention, we hope that this paper offers a stimulating contribution to the emerging thinking around evaluation, that it serves as a focus for wider engagement around this issue and that the “Provocative Propositions” outlined towards the end of the paper offer a potential framework for undertaking this important work.

## Author’s acknowledgements and thanks

We would all like to take this opportunity to recognise the particular contribution of our Scottish Government colleague Olivia McLeod to this work over the last year, bringing tremendous energy and insight around the vision of a more collective approach to leadership to help us to deliver better outcomes. Olivia passed away on 3 August 2018 after a serious illness.

Particular thanks are due to Dot McLaughlin, Janet Whitley, Karen Lawson, Keira Oliver, Alex Newlands and Anita Burns who have the vision and courage to take collective leadership forward and have made significant contributions to the development of this work. Thanks also to all those who have provided comments on an earlier draft. The author remains responsible for any errors or omissions.

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## Exploring new territories for evaluation

Dr Cathy Sharp, November 2018

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# Executive Summary





Drawing on action research, this paper recasts evaluation as ‘action inquiry’, an embedded evaluative learning practice that can help navigate complexity when enacting collective leadership.

It is offered as an invitation to inquiry amongst a reasonably well-informed audience of policy makers and practitioners who work in and for public services. It will particularly interest those who provide research, evaluation and facilitation support, and those seeking to develop a more relational approach to research and evaluation.

Action inquiry is a model of practising change together in environments where ‘nothing is clear, and everything keeps changing’ that significantly challenges the prevailing discourse on evaluation. Action inquiry can be wrapped around and enmeshed within initiatives and programmes that work with complexity - anywhere where success will depend on the quality of relationships that can be developed.

**“As we face more and more that is unknown and not capable of being understood or controlled, we must approach learning and change as relational and improvisational processes. This inevitably means building cultures that support new forms of collaborative inquiry and action research.”**

Weil (1997)

The paper reviews some important interrelated concepts that underpin the ideals of collective leadership and public service reform and which confront deeply embedded traditional notions of leadership, expertise and participation. These offer important challenges to ideas about how change happens and recognise that relationships are at the heart of practising change. This warrants a re-examination of the high expectations of evidence-based or informed practice.

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**“People use their creativity and generate adaptive solutions that make sense locally. The articulations, workarounds and muddling-through that keep the show on the road are not footnotes in the story, but its central plot. They should be carefully studied and represented in all their richness.”**

Greenhalgh and Papousti (2018)

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Collective leadership makes new demands of evidence as it rests on help to determine ‘wise actions’ in real-life situations. This confronts the practical reality of how to work together in conditions often expressed as ‘dynamic’ or ‘turbulent’ and the added human complexities of power, emotions and relationships; too often these elements are denied or avoided aspects of a change process. Facilitated action inquiry makes these elements part of the conversations, in the midst of ‘work-as-we-are-doing-it’, to increase areas of choice for individuals and a group as a whole.

Within public policy, there is an overwhelming amount of evidence about ‘what works’ yet change seems to be stubborn and slow. The paper explores some of the deep-rooted vestiges of a ‘hierarchy of evidence’ and assumptions about standardisation and generalisability that act as a ‘barrier to transformation’. These include the narrow framing of what counts as evidence and consequent relegation of community perspectives, lived experience and practice-based evidence.

The paper acknowledges the clear appetite for different approaches to evaluation, especially those that better reflect deeply held values and avoid creating a culture of ‘gaming’, rooted in fear of failure and loss of funding, at the expense of learning. The need for new forms of developmental evaluative thinking, collaborative inquiry and action research to create embedded learning is well overdue.

Action inquiry is a desirable and necessary response to the complex situations and challenges of human services and recognises the essentialness of knowledge co-production. It is a model of co-creation at every stage and endorses the idea that people learn from participation in evaluation and by testing theories of change through action.

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**“Everything that you do in a system is an intervention... and everything you experience is data about the system.”**

Schein (2015)

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Action inquiry builds on the idea of inquiry, or a moment-to-moment awareness and quality of attention and draws from several elements of action research practice. It sees inquiry as an intervention in itself, one that furthermore, explicitly seeks to enhance the probability of the success of a programme, focus on learning, the collaborative development of practice-based knowledge and positive relationships.

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**“It has taken me a long time to unlearn the art of using questions as clubs with which to bludgeon other people.”**

Pearce (2007)

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The paper highlights the importance of building inquiry into living systems, the role of facilitation, systemic inquiry, and evaluative thinking. It proposes an expansion of ideas of appreciation as a relational and collaborative practice that is a driver of emergence. Social recognition that acknowledges someone’s social value to the community and implies mutual moral obligations to cooperation and participation is particularly crucial in a work context that requires successful coordination and multiple contributions to achieve results across hierarchies of position, professional rank and sectors. Hence, appreciation goes beyond the idea of positivity to include social recognition, valuing more explicit forms of inquiry, building participants’ aspirations to design new social systems and acting in new ways to embed change.

In developing this discussion, the paper contributes to emerging dialogues about the need for a model of ‘5th generation evaluation’. Such a model would be based on the idea that appreciative and challenging inquiry that is contextual, relational and open-minded will create better opportunities for change and development. The paper sets out some ‘provocative propositions’ that can help us to navigate this terrain, perhaps of a fledgling ‘5th generation approach’ to inquiry.

Facilitated action inquiry can hold the key to developing both new knowledge and an adaptive, collaborative and improvisational skill-set, able to respond in new ways to systemic and complex issues on the ground. It’s common to hear the expression ‘it’s all about relationships’ and it is clearly time to shift our focus to relationships; not relationships as ‘things’, but as co-created and dynamic relational processes in which we are embedded. In this way we can bring new qualities to our talking to each other about our various and shared visions of a better future.

# 1 Introduction and context



Collective Leadership for Scotland is a leadership programme committed to using action inquiry to throw light on, and help groups work through, the puzzles and paradoxes of the human service systems in which we work. Rooted in action research, the term action inquiry is used to convey the basic practice of seeking or searching, expressing the idea of curiosity, of asking questions and exploring understandings. It offers a deeper way of understanding and explaining how things are and the possible pathways to how things might be otherwise.

This paper develops an understanding of the contribution of the wider philosophy, theory and practice of action research to recast evaluation as an embedded learning practice that can help navigate complexity when enacting collective leadership. The paper is written in the context of public service reform in Scotland that seeks a fundamental shift in the relationship between people who use public services and people who work within them. It contributes to debates about an emergent ‘Scottish approach to public policy’<sup>123</sup> and discussions about the implications for a parallel ‘Scottish approach to evidence’.<sup>45</sup>

The impetus for the paper is to establish the foundations of the approach to learning and evaluation of the Workforce Scotland Collective Leadership for Scotland programme.<sup>6</sup> The Collective Leadership for Scotland offer is made to cross-organisational groups of practitioners who are grappling with a complex issue, are open to doing things differently and learning from their practice as they go about it. Examples include meeting the needs of the frail elderly living at home; tackling domestic abuse in a particular local authority area; improving integrated care for GP patients living in a very deprived area; achieving better outcomes for vulnerable families and improving cross-sector working in children’s services.

With such examples as the focus, a pair of facilitators work with a group of leaders in a locality over a period of time and provide developmental support, incorporating individual and team coaching. Usually both of the facilitators are external to the immediate context and drawn from within the wider public service system. Collective Leadership for Scotland also offers regular short taster sessions and opportunities to develop and share learning across sites. The approach seeks to develop the participants’ sense of inquiry into their own collective leadership, whilst also drawing on theories about systems thinking, complexity and leadership. It values the diversity amongst people and organisations, seeking to develop a collective vision or purpose that can transcend rather than erase or disguise differences.

The programme shares many features with other public policy interventions that, whilst underpinned by a body of theory and practice, ultimately rely on the development of positive relationships that can withstand challenge and honest conversations, and which are inherently open-ended and continuously evolving.

1 Housden, P (2014) This is us: A perspective on public services in Scotland, *Public Policy and Administration*, 2014, Vol. 29(1) 64–74

2 Cairney, P (2015) Evidence-based best practice is more political than it looks: a case study of the ‘Scottish Approach’, *University of Stirling*

3 Cairney, P, Russell, S and St Denny, E (2016) The ‘Scottish approach’ to policy and policymaking: what issues are territorial and what are universal? *Policy & Politics*, Volume 44, Number 3, July

4 Office of the Chief Social Policy Adviser (2015) *The Scottish Approach to Government: How should we measure and evaluate progress?* Scottish Government Working Paper, December

5 Coutts, P and Brochie, J (2017) *The Scottish approach to evaluation A Discussion Paper*, Alliance for Useful Evidence and Carnegie UK, Nesta

6 <https://workforcescotland.com/workstream/collective-leadership/>

It is with this immediate context in mind that this paper seeks to offer a complexity-informed and coherent way of thinking about evidence use and generation and tackles several important, interrelated concepts. Firstly, it explores some key ideas about collaboration, leadership and participatory practice and how change actually happens. It then proposes that these warrant a re-examination of the high expectations of evidence-based or informed practice.

The paper concludes by developing ideas about how to support new forms of collaborative inquiry and action research and the emergent field of '5th generation evaluation'. This is a timely, if not overdue, excursion aimed at a reasonably well-informed audience of policy makers and practitioners in public services, those that provide research, evaluation and facilitation support and a broader audience of those seeking to develop a more relational approach to research and evaluation. It is selective, drawing on both published peer-reviewed and 'grey' literature and aims to distil and synthesise some key helpful concepts and approaches. As a work in progress, and whilst conceptually dense, it is offered as a small, distinct contribution to a larger, ambitious endeavour and to stimulate further dialogue amongst those who find resonance for their work.

# 2

## Public service reform, co-production and collective leadership





Public service reform across the UK is a direct response not only to fiscal conditions, political choices and demographic changes, but also to previous failures to tackle longstanding, deep-rooted social problems and inequalities. In Scotland, the landscape of public service reform is significantly influenced by the Commission into the Future of Public Services (the ‘Christie Commission’) that called for a radical, new and collaborative culture and recommends particular styles of government in terms of principles - as the right thing to do.<sup>7</sup>

The ‘Christie Commission’ sought a growing emphasis on partnership working, prevention and co-production, to enable greater choice and control over the services people receive and the lives they lead. These still to be realised ideals seek a fundamental shift in the relationship between people who use public services and people who work within them. The term ‘co-production’ was coined originally in the 1970s in the USA and was initially used in the UK to explain ‘why doctors need patients as much as patients need doctors such that, when that relationship is forgotten, both sides fail’.<sup>8</sup> Most simply it explains that relationships need to be reciprocal for change to happen.

Whilst co-production and collective leadership are not synonymous, both ideas challenge deeply embedded traditional notions of leadership and expertise. Whilst there may well be distinctions, leadership is increasingly understood as no longer about a single, heroic, individual leader or expert that drives a predetermined change process, but as a participatory and improvisational practice that recognises the mutuality, reciprocity and interdependencies within any system.<sup>9,10</sup>

Collective leaders consider the processes and conditions under which members of a group or organisation can work together to achieve their common vision. This is a significant challenge to ideas about how change happens and recognises that relationships are at the heart of practising change. Such relational leadership is essentially a meaning-making process that recognises and aims to combine and strengthen different kinds of knowledge and experience. It builds and builds-on interdependencies and enables people to understand what they can do by providing value standards and self-confidence to engage in change, perhaps helping to overcome a sense of paralysis or overwhelm at the scale of the challenges.<sup>11</sup>

7 Christie Commission (2011) Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services. <https://www.gov.scot/Resource/Doc/352649/0118638.pdf>

8 New Economics Foundation (2008) Co-production - A Manifesto for growing the core economy

9 Ospina, S. M and Foldy, E. G (2015) Enacting Collective Leadership in a Shared Power World, in Perry, J.L and Christensen, R. K, Handbook of Public Administration, 3rd Edition, Jossey-Bass

10 Senge, P. Hamilton, H. and Kania, J (2015) The Dawn of System Leadership, Stanford Social Innovation Review, Winter

11 Park, P. (2001). Knowledge and participatory research, in Reason, P and Bradbury, H (eds), Handbook of Action Research, Sage

12 Grint, K (Undated). Wicked Problems and Clumsy Solutions: the Role of Leadership. Cranfield University.

13 Heifetz, R. A and Linsky, M (2002) Leadership on the Line, Harvard Business School Press

Collective Leadership for Scotland and similar collaborative leadership programmes support participants to work in collaboration and amidst complexity on real, intractable, adaptive or 'wicked' issues.<sup>12 13</sup> The term 'wicked' has widespread currency and has come to be associated with an understanding of the web of elements that make many public policy issues so stubborn. Features of wicked problems include there being no clear relationship between cause and effect, huge uncertainty and implications for leadership, as only collective engagement can hope to address such problems.

Furthermore, whatever the substantive issue, there are added layers of complexity rooted in systems and people; complexity is generated by the services, organisational systems and relationships amongst them and from both those who work in services and people who are intended to benefit.

Keith Grint distinguishes between tame, wicked and critical problems, but all categories of problem, even those 'tame' problems (that have been seen before), also have a human aspect that contributes to making change complicated and sometimes complex.

Over the last decade, there is a discernible shift in the Scottish and wider UK policy environment with greater acknowledgement of complexity, and perhaps fewer reactions to it that seek to either deny or control it. There is better recognition of the complexity of people's lives, including the often-overlooked richness, strengths or assets of people and communities, alongside the challenges they face.<sup>14</sup>

And, there is both a shared hunger for change and weariness of 'fixes that fail'; the unintended consequences and further complexities that can be created in seeking to deliver support or solve problems.<sup>15</sup> A further dimension is that, of course, collaboration is sometimes formalised in legislation, for example in Scotland, in Health and Social Care Integration, Community Planning Partnerships and Community Empowerment legislation.

Collaborative, or 'system leadership' is not seen as a short-term reactive problem-solving, information sharing or technical response, assumed to ultimately lead to improved outcomes. It is an adaptive, holistic approach to 'accelerate adaptive joint learning and growth', that sees a systemic approach and collective leadership as 'two sides of the same coin'.<sup>16</sup> Whilst policy intentions and practices on the ground may well diverge, there is a discernible shift in understandings of collaboration that are emerging, informed by systems thinking and a focus that is less about structures and more about relationships.<sup>17 18</sup>

14 Garven, F. McLean, J and Pattoni, L (2016) Asset-based approaches: their rise, role and reality, Dunedin

15 Seddon, J (2008) Systems Thinking in the Public Sector: the failure of the reform regime ...and a manifesto for a better way, Triarchy Press Ltd

16 Senge et al, 2015 op cit.

17 Ibid.

18 Cooke, G and Muir, R. (2012) The Relational State How Recognising The Importance Of Human Relationships Could Revolutionise The Role Of The State, IPPR

Of course, working in collaboration is not any easier than it ever was; ‘risk-taking’ is often a strong theme in discussions of collective leadership and it is not to say that people will inevitably collaborate productively. A whole range of habits and behaviours might well be exhibited, whether they are explicitly noticed or treated as a form of intelligence:

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**“Crashing through the woods is how we have learned to be together in organisations. All it takes to scare the soul away is to make a sarcastic comment or to roll the eyes in a meeting. If we are to invite all of who we are to show up, including the shy inner voice of the soul, we need to create safe and caring spaces at work. We must learn to discern and be mindful of the subtle ways our words and actions undermine safety and trust in a community of colleagues.”** <sup>19</sup>

Laloux, F (2014)

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Collaboration isn’t something to be avoided ‘if you can’ because it’s difficult.<sup>21</sup> Instead, collaboration is essential to generate the collective intelligence and collaborative action needed to help produce and sustain change. The practical implications of the idea that ‘collaboration is essential’ encompasses important dimensions. These include the importance of organisational collective endeavour and cross-sectoral working; the need to blend multidisciplinary and professional knowledge and experience with the expertise of people that use services; and, an attitude of mind that seeks out multiple perspectives and sees diversity of experience and perspective as an asset. Even so, few people appreciate the nature of the commitment needed to build collaborative networks for systemic change.<sup>22</sup>

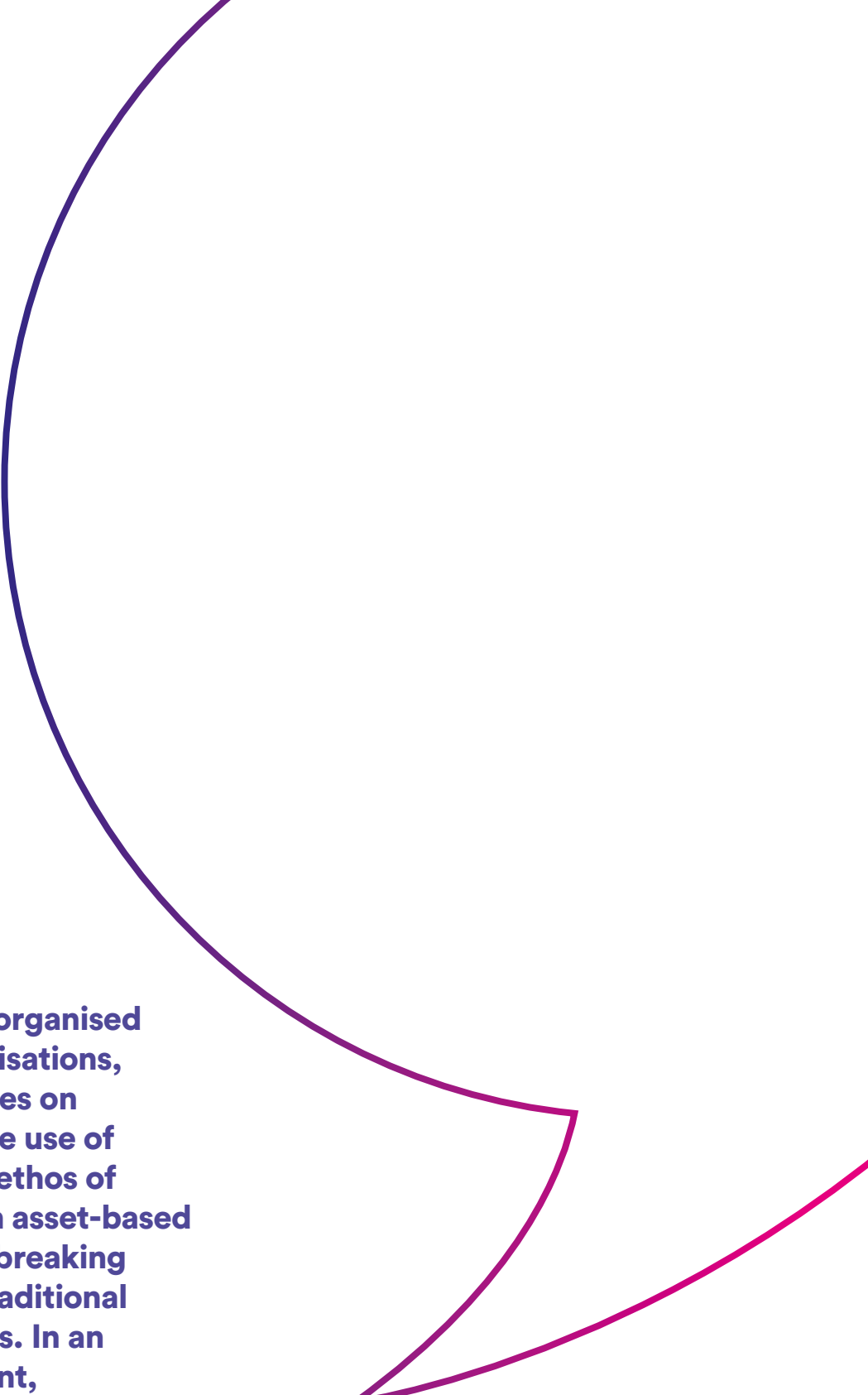
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<sup>19</sup> Laloux, F (2014) *Reinventing Organizations*, Nelson Parker

<sup>20</sup> Housden, P (2014) *op cit.*

<sup>21</sup> Huxham, C. and Vangen, S (2004) *Doing Things Collaboratively: Realizing the Advantage or Succumbing to Inertia?* *Organizational Dynamics*, Vol. 33, No. 2, pp. 190–201, 2004

<sup>22</sup> Senge et al, 2015 *op cit.*



**“...to orient formally-organised and structured organisations, each with strong duties on accountability and the use of public money, to the ethos of co-production and an asset-based approach, is ground-breaking work. It challenges traditional roles and assumptions. In an outcomes environment, an organisation has to think, plan and act differently – about its resources, programmes, staff, management and governance... This new way of working both gives more opportunities to and places greater demands on front-line staff.”<sup>20</sup>**



# 3 Collective leadership as a participatory practice

In this shifting paradigm, there is increasing understanding of the importance of relationships and language in how we make meaning together. The emphasis on relationships is not about ‘who we know’, nor about treating relationships as objects or ‘things’, but about recognising the co-created and dynamic relational processes in which we are already embedded, and that learning is a relational achievement.<sup>23</sup>

Joe Raelin develops this by talking of leadership as a practice in which people create knowledge as they improvise around a problem that they are confronting.<sup>24</sup> Leadership as practice does not focus on the relationship between ‘leaders’ and ‘followers’ but looks to the (relational) activity of all those who are engaged, to their social interactions, and to their reflections and adjustments to their ongoing work.

This has implications for how we think about knowledge, the underpinning epistemology or ‘how we know what we know’ and learning. We have been taught to be ‘standing on the outside looking in’, yet the kind of knowledge that leaders need to participate - to make and remake the world - is very different from what they need if they remain as observers.<sup>25</sup> Social constructionism treats ‘knowledge as inhering in relations among people’.<sup>26</sup> It is not enough to use what might be called ‘spectator knowledge’, where phenomena and events are observed from the outside to derive universal laws, develop generalisable propositions and seek compliance.

Collective leadership rests on help to determine ‘wise actions’ in real-life situations, enabling us to ‘speak differently, rather than argue well’, drawing on ‘participatory knowledge’ including knowledge from lived experience and that of practitioners, and valuing ways of knowing that might be expressed in more unconventional, creative ways.<sup>27 28</sup>

Whilst spectator/participatory knowledge is a neat and perhaps sufficient distinction, it is worth noting the widely quoted ‘extended epistemology’ of action research that distinguishes between experiential, presentational, propositional and practical ways of knowing.<sup>29</sup> Spectator knowledge is perhaps closely akin to propositional knowing; experiential, presentational and practical knowing might be thought of as forms of or expressions of participatory knowledge.

23 Gergen, K (2014) From Mirroring to World-Making: Research as Future Forming, *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, DOI: 10.1111/jtsb.12075

24 Raelin, J (2016) Imagine there are no leaders: Reframing leadership as collaborative agency, *Leadership*, Vol. 12(2) 131–158, Sage

25 See <https://actionresearchplus.com/waking-climate-transformations-undisciplined-knowledge-with-ioan-fazey/>

26 Gergen, K (2014) op cit.

27 Raelin, J (2016) op cit.

28 Pearce, W. B (2007) *Making Social Worlds. A communication perspective*. Oxford, Blackwell.

29 Heron, J and Reason, P (2001) The Practice of Co-operative Inquiry. Research ‘with’ rather than ‘on’ People, in P. Reason and H. Bradbury (eds) *Handbook of Action Research*, Sage

# 4

**Complexity  
informed  
understandings  
of how change  
actually  
happens**





3) **Adopt a future forming focus:** we believe that what we focus on becomes our reality. The more we get more of what we study. A focus on the shared desirable future is a better guiding star for evaluation and learning than a focus on what went right or wrong in the past, and why.

2) **Be practical:** available to be involved in a ground uncertainty work environment

KEIRA

This discussion suggests that there are significant implications for thinking about how change happens. In complexity, change happens through emergence that begins as small, local actions and variations in practice. Emergence is thus co-created; small actions can have major effects by shifting the focus of attention and intention, triggering different choices by making visible options that did not previously appear to be available.<sup>30</sup> Such ‘action’ might include a single word or conversation that might initiate an ‘entire cascade of system wide change’.

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**“People use their creativity and generate adaptive solutions that make sense locally. The articulations, workarounds and muddling-through that keep the show on the road are not footnotes in the story, but its central plot. They should be carefully studied and represented in all their richness.”<sup>31</sup>**

Greenhalgh, T and Papousti, C (2018)

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These adjustments, deviations, or more colloquially, ‘what actually happens’, are referred to as ‘work-as-done’, (in contrast to ‘work-as-imagined’) a term that describes how work unfolds over time in complex contexts, in conditions often expressed as ‘dynamic’ or even, ‘turbulent’.<sup>32</sup> Systems perform reliably because people are flexible and adaptive, rather than because the systems have been perfectly designed or because people comply and do precisely what has been prescribed. Furthermore, this variability (the ‘central plot’) is necessary for the system to function and is the reason for both acceptable and adverse outcomes.

Complexity recognises the place of human agency and overturns assumptions that change happens in a linear way, built on a predictive, causal logic that specific outcomes will result. We can no longer assume that solutions to problems are known, the context is stable and provides the conditions under which ‘best practice’ can be replicated.

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30 Burns, D (2007) Systemic Action Research, Policy Press

31 Greenhalgh, T and Papousti, C (2018) Studying complexity in health services research: desperately seeking an overdue paradigm shift, BMC Medicine (2018) 16:95 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12916-018-1089-4>

32 Hollnagel, E. Wears, R. L and Braithwaite, J (2015) From Safety-I to Safety-II: A White Paper, The Resilient Health Care Net: Published simultaneously by the University of Southern Denmark, University of Florida, USA, and Macquarie University, Australia.

Emergence means that interventions may produce unpredictable or unintended consequences, there may be complex feedback loops and change is mediated by system dynamics, which include power dynamics, emotions and relationships. The drivers of emergence are aspiration and passion – the vision and enactment of a new idea that can lift the organisation to a new level:

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**“[those] looking for emergence in a complex system should start by finding where passion is being expressed; if the conditions are right emergence is probably not far behind.”<sup>33</sup>**

Lichtenstein, B (2015)

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As many will accord, any change process must make sense to those on the ground responsible for implementation; change is more likely to be accepted when people are involved in the decisions and activities that affect them, but they resist when change is imposed by others. A ‘work-as-done’ perspective acknowledges these power realities and accords a different status to the place of ‘practice’ and the relationship between practice, knowledge, emotions and context. It makes human agency and emotions central to both collective leadership and learning and change.

The recognition of agency has strong echoes of Lipsky’s theory of ‘street-level bureaucrats’, public servants who have a high degree of discretion as they improvise to respond to the particular needs of individual citizens with whom they interact in the course of their job.<sup>34</sup> It is these practices and routines that effectively become the public policies they carry out and can diverge from the intended direction of policy, undermining public expectations of even-handed treatment. Arguably, this potential for discrimination and unfair treatment warrants a greater emphasis on self and peer group reflective practice to recognise this reality. Moreover, this discussion about the essentialness of collaboration, leadership as a participatory practice and work-as-done as elements in creating the gap between policy and practice, merits a re-examination of the high expectations of evidence-based or informed practice.

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<sup>33</sup> Lichtenstein, B (2015) Complex Systems and Emergence in Action Research, in Bradbury, H (ed) The Sage Handbook of Action Research, Third Edition

<sup>34</sup> Lipsky, M (2010) Street-Level Bureaucracy, 30th Ann. Ed. Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Service, Russell Sage Foundation

# 5 Evidence and the implementation problem

valuing the opportunity to discuss how its feeling explore understanding

MAKE THE EFFORT TO LIST TO EACH OTHER'S PLACES

always ask: "What do they do or the other 3?"

10% time Dfid

Mandatory networking (the effort not doing money) - but make sure to have some at

Safe space again

Strength of relationships

Structure for engagement - regular meetings - even if 10 minutes

Story board this event (will help us generate more understanding)

perceive barriers - reality - common goals

Identify 'wicked issues' - Norman

LTL in Wales/Skull NI

Travel events We

Don't leave relationship building until issues are burning

% Climate Change

REALLY LISTEN TO EACH OTHER

LET US BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Take your peers monthly time slot Conf call

CREATE 4-5 MINUTE DISCUSSION USGS IN ONE FULLY AGG AREAS

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**“The management and practice literature is full of complexity-informed work. The one area where substantial correction is required is in relation to the ways in which ‘evidence-based’ practice and policy are discussed and presented.”<sup>35</sup>**

Byrne, D and Callaghan, G (2014)

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There is an overwhelming amount of evidence about ‘what works’, or at least what has worked, in a particular context, yet change seems to be stubborn and slow:

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**“...as impact evaluations have multiplied, it has become apparent that ‘the same’ policy can have very different effects in different populations. Similarly, policies shown to be effective in small trials have not always been as effective when implemented at scale, even in the same country.”<sup>36</sup>**

Williams, M. J (2017)

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There is not scope here to revisit the extensive literature on bridging the evidence-policy gap.<sup>37 38 39</sup> There are some helpful summaries, for example, reviewing the relationship between evidence and innovation in Scottish Social Services, Jodie Pennacchia provides a good overview of the debates and challenges of the use of evidence.<sup>40</sup> Rather than review the wide range of knowledge-to-action models, frameworks and theories, it is sufficient to note that most focus on the implementation of explicit knowledge, derived from scientific research, rather than more interactional frameworks that create environments that encourage engagement with a wide variety of knowledge.<sup>41 42</sup>

Comparing implementation and improvement frameworks, Reed, Green and Howe suggest improvement frameworks place more emphasis on understanding the local problem, without assuming the solution is already known. Improvement frameworks also emphasise the need to build capability and capacity of the people within the system to continue learning and improving over time.<sup>43</sup>

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35 Byrne, D and Callaghan, G (2014) *Complexity Theory and the Social Sciences*, Routledge

36 Williams, M. J (2017) *External validity and policy adaptation - From impact evaluation to policy design*, University of Oxford, BSG Working Paper Series

37 Davies, H. T. O, Nutley, S. M. and Smith, P. C (2000) (eds). *What Works? Evidence -based policy and practice in public services*, Policy Press. Bristol

38 Nutley, S. M. Walter I and Davies H (2007) *Using Evidence, How research can inform public services*. Policy Press. Bristol

39 Nutley, S. (2012). *Connecting evidence, policy and practice in an era of austerity, complexity and decentralised decision making - Maps, routes and shoes*. Retrieved from Campbell Collaboration Colloquium Copenhagen: <http://www.sfi.dk/Default.aspx?ID=10712>

40 Pennacchia, J (2013) *Exploring the Relationships Between Evidence and Innovation in the Context of Scotland’s Social Services*, IRISS

41 Bietsa, G. J. J (2010) *Why ‘What Works’ Still Won’t Work: From Evidence-Based Education to Value-Based Education*, *Stud Philos Educ* 29: 491-503

42 Nutley, 2012 op cit.

43 Reed, J. Green, S and Howe, C (2018) *Translating evidence in complex systems: a comparative review of implementation and improvement frameworks*, *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*, 1–10

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At times this literature rests on ‘ideal types’ or even stereotypes and it can be hard not to fall into this trap; real-world policy-making and research might be better characterised by pragmatism than purism, with policy-makers drawing on a ‘variety of sources of knowledge’.<sup>44</sup> Thankfully, these debates have certainly evolved to recognise the realities of the policy-making process with a more contingent use of evidence, an acknowledged trade-off with values and preferences, for example those of local communities, and a focus on actual practice, local reinvention and customisation, particularly in healthcare improvement.

In this latter respect, Implementation Science, (which has focused on promoting the uptake of research findings into health care practice) and Improvement Science are both responses to the evidence-into-practice issues and Improvement Science is a significant part of the ‘Scottish Approach to Policy Making’.<sup>45</sup>

Rooted in the Scottish NHS patient safety programme and based on the Institute of Healthcare Improvement ‘Breakthrough Series Collaborative Model’,<sup>46</sup> it seeks to identify promising interventions and encourages practitioners to adapt interventions to their area, and gather data on their experience, through multiple Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles.

An important idea from improvement science is that all improvement comes from developing, testing, and implementing changes and that the role of measurement is to create feedback (learning) loops to gauge the impact of these changes over time as conditions vary in the environment.<sup>47</sup> A recent exploratory review of how implementation and improvement frameworks conceptualise complexity identifies gaps in how these frameworks deal with the practical reality of working in complex systems; notably, one of the ‘simple rules for complex systems’ of ‘facilitate dialogue’ is poorly attended to.<sup>48</sup>

Whilst the features of testing, feedback and capacity building are certainly valuable in thinking about collective leadership, improvement science is a prescriptive and correctional model driven by professional expertise, focusing on first-order change that does not modify the wider system.<sup>49 50</sup> People who use services and communities offer a different kind of expertise. The ideas of participatory democracy, community empowerment and co-production beg questions about what the role of communities is in collective leadership; whether they are co-producers of models of change or simply resources for their implementation?<sup>51</sup>

44 Cairney, P and Oliver, K (2017) Evidence-based policymaking is not like evidence-based medicine, so how far should you go to bridge the divide between evidence and policy? *Health Research Policy and Systems*, 15:35 DOI 10.1186/s12961-017-0192-x

45 Cairney, P (2017) Evidence-based best practice is more political than it looks: a case study of the ‘Scottish Approach’, *Evidence and Policy*, vol 13, no 3

46 IHI (2003) *The Breakthrough Series: IHI’s Collaborative Model for Achieving Breakthrough Improvement*. IHI Innovation Series white paper. Boston: Institute for Healthcare Improvement

47 Perla, R. J. Provost, L. P and Parry, G J (2013) Seven Propositions of the Science of Improvement: Exploring Foundations, *Q Manage Health Care*, Vol. 22, No. 3

48 Reed, J. Green, S and Howe, C (2018) op cit.

49 Perla, R. J et al (2013) op cit.

50 The term ‘development’ is preferred to improvement to avoid the assumption that it refers to improvement science and to recognise that ‘improvement’ may not always be needed.

51 Alan Barr (personal communication) 2014

Writing from a community development perspective Alan Barr suggests that:

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**“...we will only realise those ambitions [to work together and learn together] if there is a concerted and integrated approach that embraces inter-professional and community partnership and establishes an open and honest culture of collaborative evaluation that facilitates joint learning and innovative practice.”** <sup>52</sup>

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It's clear that we are still grappling with the deep-rooted vestiges of a hierarchy of evidence that relegates community perspectives, lived experience and practice-based evidence and ossifies the separation of research producers and users.

More hopefully, greater understanding of complexity brings a new, promising edge to the debates about the role of evidence in informing change and enacting collective leadership. Earlier debates in Scotland amongst policy makers and evaluation practitioners, reflected an emerging interest in action research.

The Scottish Community Action Research Fund (SCARF) ran successfully between 2002 and 2009 and supported over 130 community groups to improve their skills and confidence to carry out action research and there is interest now in re-establishing something similar. <sup>53 54</sup>

In 2004, Eliot Stern from the Tavistock Institute argued that action research is a way of integrating evaluation ‘types’: combining judgement with development and explanation with empowerment and thereby combining analysis with action and theory with practice. <sup>55</sup> Soon afterwards, the Scottish Executive funded a scoping study to explore the potential use of action research and applied research to support evidence-based practice and improve public sector delivery. <sup>56</sup>

Whilst these earlier discussions created some traction, more recent practitioner discussions show the relevance, importance and urgency of the need to shift evaluation mindsets. These now venture beyond ideas about mobilisation, ‘translation’ or attempts to improve the supply chain, for example, by enhancing collaboration between academics and the third sector. <sup>57</sup>

There is a clear appetite for different approaches, particularly those that avoid superficiality or tokenism and reflect deeply held values. There is dissatisfaction with evaluation practices that conflate evaluation with the measurement of intended outcomes, linked to a ‘high-stakes accountability’ that creates a culture of ‘gaming’, rooted in fear of failure and loss of funding, at the expense of learning. <sup>58 59 60 61</sup>

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52 Barr, A (2014) Community Development – Everyone’s Business? SCDC, CDAS, SCDN

53 <http://www.scdc.org.uk/what/community-led-action-research/scarf/>

54 SCDC and Poverty Alliance (2018) Knowledge is Power - equalising power relationships through community-led action research <http://www.scdc.org.uk/news/article/knowledge-power-new-report-importance-community-le/>

55 Elliot Stern from the Tavistock Institute, presentation given at Scottish Evaluation Network Workshop: 30 January 2004.

56 Sharp, C (2005) The Improvement of Public Sector Delivery: Supporting Evidence Based Practice through Action Research, Scottish Executive.

57 See for example, <http://evaluation.lshtm.ac.uk/2018/03/27/systems-perspectives-policy-development-evaluation/>

58 Evaluation Support Scotland (2018) Evidence for What? Lessons from the third sector, April 2018 <http://bit.ly/2unii4r>

59 McNeil, B. in Slocock, C (2018) (ed) Insights for a Better Way, Improving Services and Building Strong Communities, Carnegie UK and Civil Exchange

60 See also <http://research-for-real.co.uk/2018/02/02/reigniting-evaluation-unfolding-stories/>

61 A related point might be made that, too often, logic models simply express the intentions or espoused theory of policy makers, a single stakeholder or funder; their main value might be in how they are developed and if they highlight the ‘risks and assumptions’, often simply footnoted.



Writing in 2010, Michael Quinn Patton identified that there is a lot of lip service in evaluation about looking for unanticipated consequences and assessing side effects, suggesting that they are often token elements of evaluation designs that are inadequately budgeted for and rarely given serious time and attention.<sup>62</sup> More recently, he proposes a model of ‘Principles Focused Evaluation’ that seeks evidence of the espoused principles of practice in action and offers a values-based inquiry framework and focus for developmental evaluation, that is explored further below.<sup>63</sup> Memorably, he suggests that:

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**“We are familiar with systems thinking, but we haven’t used it in evaluation.”<sup>64</sup>**

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Describing traditional evaluation as a ‘barrier to transformation’, Michael Quinn Patton suggests that ideas about knowledge generation and use, empowerment and engagement through evaluation is a ‘specialised niche that is ripe for synthesis’.<sup>65</sup>

It is this focus on action or theories-in-use,<sup>66</sup> that is important and promising. An ‘action turn’ in evaluation, is effectively a model of ‘insider’ or embedded self-evaluation in which a reflective, collective inquiry process occurs as a continuous thread throughout. We may be at a tipping point of a new paradigm.

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**“As we face more and more that is unknown and not capable of being understood or controlled, we must approach learning and change as relational and improvisational processes. This inevitably means building cultures that support new forms of collaborative inquiry and action research.”<sup>67</sup>**

Weil, S. (1997)

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It is striking that the quote above from Susan Weil is over twenty years old and suggests that the need for new forms of developmental evaluative thinking, collaborative inquiry and action research to create such embedded learning is well overdue.

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62 Quinn Patton, M (2010) *Developmental Evaluation: Applying Complexity Concepts to Enhance Innovation and Use*, Guilford Publications

63 Quinn Patton, M (2018) *Principles Focused Evaluation -The Guide*, The Guilford Press

64 <http://www.transformations2017.org/keynote-videos>

65 Ibid.

66 Putnam, R. W (2014) *Theories of action*, in Coughlan, D and Brydon-Miller, M, *The Sage Encyclopedia of Action Research*, Sage

67 Weil, S. (1997) ‘Social and organisational learning in a different key: an introduction to the principles of critical learning theatre and dialectical inquiry’, in F. Stowell, R. Ison and R. Armsonet (eds) *Systems for sustainability: People, organisations and environments*, New York, NY: Plenum.

# 6 Building cultures that support new forms of collaborative inquiry and action research

# SHAPING the FUTURE

## OUTCOMES

BRINGING CULTURE TO THE SURFACE  
& Taking a DELIBERATELY DEVELOPMENTAL approach...

INCREASING INTEREST & ENGAGEMENT IN COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP & METHODS (for) ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP & CHALLENGES

The RICH POTENTIAL TO LEARN & WORK WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

a unique expertise in working with young people

BLENDING THE NEW WITH THE EXISTING

Clear thinking  
COURAGE

NETWORKS SUPPORT

MODELLING THIS IN SMALL GROUPS

HOW CAN WE DO MORE TO GET INTO THE MTS OFFER

We are actively TESTING COLLABORATIVE WORKING ON COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

TESTING & WORKING ON STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

RECOGNISING THE PATTERNS & WHAT WE SHARE IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

70% HERE

ANCHORED IN SHARED PURPOSE STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

METHODS...WAYS & INTEGRATING ALL CAPABILITY WORKING...NOT KNOWING

More & flourish  
Spreading - awareness  
growing shared understanding & language



A reconsideration of the nature of leadership in complexity and reassertion of co-creation and human agency in understanding how change actually happens challenges many pervasive ideals about evidence use, generation and testing.

The rest of this paper considers what might be meaningful and useful in building new cultures of evaluative practice through collaborative inquiry and action research.

## Develop a future-making orientation to inquiry through action research

Several writers on complexity, social theory and research have identified the relevance of action research, as a dialogical, integrative method engaged with practice. Action and engagement become part of the process of co-production of knowledge; it is not possible, even unethical, to engage with complex social systems from the outside.<sup>68</sup> The pedagogy of Paulo Freire underpins action research as dialogical research that is part of conscientization and empowerment;<sup>69</sup>

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**“The starting point... must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people... (We) must pose this... to the people as a problem which challenges them and requires a response – not just at an intellectual level, but at a level of action.”<sup>70</sup>**

Freire (1972)

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This is often narrowly understood to mean that only knowledge ‘from below’ or ‘bottom up’ is valid and may have contributed to the interpretation of action research as being about the participation of communities in research. Byrne and Callaghan make the important point that for Freire, dialogue was ‘never a one-way street – everybody taught and everybody learned’ such that all knowledges (note the plural here) are incomplete.<sup>71</sup>

Action research pushes inquiry beyond the idea of a dialogue, to act in order to achieve mutually desired change; this is a reorientation of the purpose of inquiry, as a creative, dynamic, value-based exploration into ‘what could be’ - what Ken Gergen calls a ‘future-forming’ orientation to research.<sup>72</sup> The emphasis of ‘action inquiry’ on dialogue, collaboration, purpose, values and action might be most simply expressed as:

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**“The point of research should be to talk to each other about what we ought to be doing.”<sup>73</sup>**

Reason, P (undated)

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68 Byrne, D and Callaghan, G (2014) op cit.

69 Conscientization is an emancipatory pedagogical process developed by Paulo Freire designed to teach students through critical literacies how to negotiate the world in a thoughtful way that exposes and engages the relations between the oppressor and the oppressed. See Macedo, D (2014) Conscientization, in Coughlan, D and Brydon-Miller, M, The Sage Encyclopedia of Action Research, Sage

70 Freire, 1972, Pedagogy of the oppressed. Penguin

71 Byrne, D and Callaghan, G (2014) op cit.

72 Byrne and Callaghan (2014) ibid. Gergen (2014) op cit.

In this way, action inquiry weaves together action and inquiry and emphasises the role of the ‘collective leaders’ in setting problems as well as in solving them and the importance of reflecting on action to discover the tacit knowledge embedded in it;

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**“ ... when people talk they are performing such actions as promising, justifying, ordering, conceding, and so forth. This relation may be obscured by common sense expressions such as ‘all talk and no action.’ But, if we think of the situations in which such a comment might be made, we can see that the talk referred to is action, namely, the action of delaying or avoiding some positive step.”<sup>74</sup>**

Argyris, C. Putnam, R. and McLain Smith, D (1985)

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It is important to note here that talk is action and that it forces us to deal with the issues raised by what happens to us and what we do with what happens to us; how we interpret what people say, the quality of conversation moment by moment and how it aligns or not with our mutual intentions, declared shared missions and goals.

Powerfully, Yoland Wadsworth asks:

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**“(How can we) build in routine times, spaces and sacrosanct places for observing and speaking (especially at cross-purposes), far far sooner – before too much damage is done and before too many unwanted ways become ‘the ways we do things around here (or else)’?”<sup>75</sup>**

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## When are we ever not piloting?

Let’s step back for a moment to consider the place of evidence amidst this focus on action and inquiry. The term ‘piloting’ has come to be understood as the testing out of a programme or policy that, if successful, will then be ‘scaled-up’ or ‘rolled-out’. At times, the term is used disparagingly perhaps because so rarely do successful programmes ever ‘go to scale’.

The 2011 revised edition of the UK HM Treasury Magenta Book guidance on evaluation discusses action research as an approach to provide feedback on a wide range of issues and ensure that implementation is as effective as possible. It proposes a number of situations when action research might prove particularly useful.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> This paraphrase of Rorty was made by Peter Reason. The original quote is “We cannot regard truth as a goal of inquiry. The purpose of inquiry is to achieve agreement among human beings about what to do, to bring consensus on the end to be achieved and the means to be used to achieve those ends. Inquiry that does not achieve coordination of behaviour is not inquiry but simply wordplay”. Rorty, R. 1999, *Philosophy and social hope*. London: Penguin Books.

<sup>74</sup> Argyris, C. Putnam, R. and McLain Smith, D (1985) *Action Science*, Jossey-Bass

<sup>75</sup> Wadsworth, Y (2011) *Building in Research and Evaluation, Human Inquiry for Living Systems*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

<sup>76</sup> HM Treasury (2011) *The Magenta Book*, HM Treasury guidance on what to consider when designing an evaluation, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-magenta-book>

These refer to novelty in ways of working or delivery of an intervention, new or unproven theories of change, a desire to test out alternative delivery options and a challenging implementation environment. It is very hard to imagine situations where one or more of these conditions do not hold. Complexity brings a stronger focus on questions about how to act, whether or not the questions or evidence are clear, and on the role of context or the 'established and entrenched ecosystem, already teeming with activity and relationships'.<sup>77</sup>

Yet, given these situational complexities, the notion that a new intervention can be adopted equally well and in the same manner across a whole system becomes untenable; we are always 'piloting'. Even so, despite greater recognition that there is no single best way to do something and that 'best' is inevitably a question of perspective, the idea of 'best practice' may be attractive and comforting, based on a desire to see impact and a defence against the charge of wasting public money.<sup>78</sup>

Such prevailing, perhaps undiscussed, assumptions about standardisation and generalisability can be the 'downfall of successful implementation'.<sup>79</sup> Reed, Green and Howe make the very pertinent suggestion that we should shift our use of terminology from the noun 'intervention' to the verb 'intervening' as the latter better reflects the iterative and negotiated process required to understand and influence complex systems.<sup>80</sup>

Yoland Wadsworth suggests that much of the popularity of action research stems from people seeing the value of experiencing for themselves all the components of a change process.<sup>81</sup> Others also paint a picture of a practice-focused, participatory, experimental, reflective, dynamic and iterative process of collective inquiry, to implement 'evidence-based' or 'evidence-informed' interventions.<sup>82</sup> As change is inherent in the practice of action inquiry, complexity-informed evaluation should engage on-the-ground service practitioners and people that use services as active participants and co-producers of knowledge in the inquiry process.

## Nurturing emergent development for scale and sustainability

These are the conceptual, ethical and practical realities with which questions about uptake, 'roll-out' or 'scale-up' must contend. It's not that 'nothing transfers', but that 'transfer' (if that is the right metaphor), is really a process of local reinvention and adaptation that demands that evidence use and generation deploys the insights and capacities of local agents or stakeholders, challenging the separation between knowledge producers and knowledge users. And, it is not that a higher standard of evidence is required to support 'roll-out', but that however well-evidenced a programme, it will always need to be reassessed and reoriented at regular intervals.<sup>83</sup> We don't implement or make change once and it's done; instead we must orientate ourselves to the need for constant adaptability.

77 Braithwaite, J. Churrua, K. Long, J. C. Ellis, L. A and Herkes, J (2018) When complexity science meets implementation science: a theoretical and empirical analysis of systems change, BMC Medicine (2018) 16:63 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12916-018-1057-z>

78 Sharp, C (2014) Creating a community of reflective practice - supporting children and mothers in recovery from domestic abuse in Stern, T., Rauch, F., Schuster, A., and Townsend, A (Eds), Promoting Change Through Action Research: Current Trends In Education, Social Work Health Care And Community Development, Sense

79 Braithwaite, J et al (2018) op cit.

80 Reed, J. E et al (2018) op cit.

81 Wadsworth, Y (2015) Shared Inquiry Capabilities and Differing Inquiry Preferences: Navigating 'Full Cycle' Iterations of Action Research, in Bradbury, H (ed) Handbook of Action Research 3rd edition, Sage, London

82 Braithwaite, J et al (2018) op cit.

83 Burns, D (2014) Assessing Impact in Dynamic and Complex Environments: Systemic Action Research and Participatory Systemic Inquiry, Centre for Development Impact, Practice Paper No 8, September <http://bit.ly/2ECDPpR>

This is a dynamic model of co-production of knowledge, that expands notions of participation to embrace all stakeholders, including practitioners who work in services and people that use them. This extended model of participation finds resonance in arguments about how to nurture change at scale and how to sustain change. Thus, the myriad of relational and conversational practices that take place on a daily basis are at the heart of learning and change; they create environments that are conducive or otherwise to engagement with a wide variety of knowledge and the testing and translation of that knowledge in action.

This shift of gaze to the everyday, micro-level practices does not ignore the questions of how to achieve change at scale, indeed scale is achieved by nurturing such emergent processes; ‘working with the stars [on the ground] to prepare the ground, fertilizing, seeding, watering, pruning, nurturing.’<sup>84</sup>

This model of change in complex systems assumes that people (communities and practitioners) have the capacity, intelligence and experience to conduct their own analysis, lead and sustain their own change; and that it is only if processes are owned that they can go to scale.<sup>85</sup> Questions of scale and sustainability are linked and lead us back to issues of ‘ownership’ – the issues of human agency, aspiration and passion - and collaboration in inquiry, so that we can more fully recognise and work with complexity, the emergent nature of change, the human system dynamics and context.

Moving away from a diagnostic of ‘what works’ to a more dialogical and dynamic approach brings many challenges for funders and commissioners of social intervening:

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**“Recognition of complexity, and working with it, rather than against it, is becoming more common.... Welcoming the knottiness of the world feeds into a more equitable relationship between funders and communities – valuing learning and improving, rather than proving; asking what matters, not what’s the matter; and putting people in the lead, instead of prescribing the solution.”<sup>86</sup>**

Knight, A. D, Lowe, T, Brossard, M and Wilson, J (2017)

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Evaluation becomes an embedded learning process. This shifts attention from attribution of impact and the fidelity of the intervention (the extent to which delivery adheres to the original protocol or model), to its effective adaptation or customisation and creates accountability for learning. It supports practitioners to continuously improve their judgement and practice, to take-up knowledge, blend it with other expertise, test it out and generate new knowledge and practical actions, all the time working within such milieus that ‘teem with activity and relationships’.

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84 Burns, D. (2015). Reaching for the stars: Nurturing participatory change at scale. Keynote speech, ALARA. Retrieved from <http://www.alarassociation.org/pages/events/alara-world-congress-2015>

85 Burns, D., & Worsley, S. (2015). Navigating complexity in international development: Facilitating sustainable change at scale. Rugby, UK: Practical Action Publishing.

86 Knight, A. D, Lowe, T, Brossard, M and Wilson, J (2017) A Whole New World: Funding and Commissioning in Complexity, Collaborate for Social Change, Newcastle University

# 7

# Action Inquiry: new territories for evaluation





Collective Leadership for Scotland uses the idea of action inquiry, the basic act of seeking or searching, to express the idea of curiosity, of asking questions and exploring understandings. It is a model of practising change together in environments where ‘nothing is clear, and everything keeps changing’ that significantly challenges the prevailing discourse on evaluation. It is a desirable and necessary response to the kind of complex situations and challenges of human services and recognises the essentialness of knowledge co-production.

Action inquiry borrows and builds on the idea of ‘living life as inquiry’ as an action research methodology that emphasises moment-to-moment awareness and qualities of attention.<sup>87</sup> It has been developed through different approaches including those of action science;<sup>88</sup> first, second and third person inquiry strategies<sup>89</sup> and systemic action research.<sup>90</sup> Action inquiry includes an element of retrospective sense-making in the service of learning and action; captured in the aphorism that ‘hindsight gives insight, insight gives foresight’.<sup>91</sup>

Significantly, action inquiry recognises inquiry or evaluative practice as a form of intervening in itself, one that furthermore, explicitly seeks to enhance the probability of the success of a programme, focus on learning and the collaborative development of practice-based knowledge. This offers a radically different set of considerations for evaluative thinking and practices emerging from the systems thinking, complexity and evidence-into-practice literature. Starting with the self, it recognises that change inevitably includes ourselves, not simply something that other people should do or that is the responsibility of an abstraction referred to as ‘the system’.

It seeks to integrate first, second and third-person inquiry practices, blending the personal insights of each participant, with mutual learning and wider whole system change, awakening and supporting these inquiry practices in a wider community, so that participants can continue to learn in collaboration.<sup>92</sup>

Such collaborative learning practices can be wrapped around and enmeshed within initiatives and programmes that work with complexity – indeed, anywhere where success will depend on the quality of relationships that can be developed. This is a model of co-creation at every stage, that challenges ideas about objectivity, independent evaluation and the separation of evaluation ‘users’ and ‘producers’. It overturns the idea that people learn from the results of evaluation, rather than from participation in evaluation.<sup>93</sup> In so doing, this attention to process offers the chance to observe practices and routines much more closely and raises the prospect of greater honesty and congruence between the values we espouse and how we act, to reduce the dissonance between policy intentions and on the ground practices.

87 Marshall, J (1999) Living Life as Inquiry in Systematic Practice and Action Research 12 (2)

88 Fisher, D, Rooke, D and Torbert, B (2003) Personal and Organisational Transformations, Edge Work Press

89 Reason, P & Bradbury, H (2001) Introduction: Inquiry and Participation in Search of a World Worthy of Human Aspiration, in Reason, P and Bradbury, H (eds) Handbook of Action Research, Sage

90 Burns, D (2007) Systemic Action Research, Policy Press

91 Bate, P and Robert, G (2007) Bringing User Experience to Healthcare Improvement, Radcliffe Publishing

92 Reason, P and Torbert, W. R (2001) The Action Turn: Towards a Transformational Social Science, in Concepts and Transformations, Vol 6, No 1.

93 Dahler-Larsen, P (2015) Evaluation as Social Construction, in Dragonas, T, Gergen, K. J, McNamee, S and Tseliou, E (eds) Education as Social Construction - Contributions to Theory, Research and Practice, Taos Institute Publications/World Share Books

Gro Emmertsen Lund, writing in 2011 has proposed that there is a need for what she calls ‘5th generation evaluation’ that would better reflect the paradigm shift brought by complexity and the wider recognition of the social construction of knowledge.<sup>94</sup> Her proposal is worth exploring in relation to the discussion here about complexity and collective leadership. Fifth-generation evaluation assumes that appreciative and challenging inquiry that is contextual, relational and open-minded will create better opportunities for change and development than critical testing, exposure, diagnoses, comparison, analyses and prescriptive conclusions.<sup>95</sup> This is not a well-developed field but would be a practice-oriented social constructionist approach to evaluation practices, designs and methods and this is explored further below.<sup>96</sup>

Whilst action research is a useful tool to create new forms of evaluation practices, this also needs further elaboration.<sup>97</sup> It has been proposed that if one accepts that people are agents that act in the world on the basis of their own sensemaking and that human community involves mutual sensemaking and collective action, then it is ‘no longer possible to do research on persons’, but ‘only possible to do research with persons’, including them in the question and sense-making that informs the research and in the action, which is the focus of the research.<sup>98</sup> Yet, the action research literature is vast and constantly evolving, so it can be hard to navigate what has been called ‘a global family of approaches’.<sup>99</sup>

The next few sections highlight some of the most useful elements that can support action inquiry that seeks to integrate first, second and third-person inquiry, with an emphasis here on the underpinning principles, rather than detail of methodology or methods.

## Build in inquiry into living systems

In discussing the reasons that so many change-efforts fail, Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaeufer suggest:

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**“...if you do not also touch how people think, converse and interact, the same people will recreate the problems they were trying to solve, just in the context of a different structure or system.”<sup>100</sup>**

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94 Lund, G E (2011) Fifth generation evaluation, <http://bit.ly/2Gr0x7R> Lund, G.E. (2011). Femte generations evaluering. I: *EvalueringNyt* 27. udgave, juli, 2011.

95 Ibid.

96 Fourth-Generation Evaluation pointed toward more responsive, democratic and participatory evaluation models, which enabled respondents, users, stakeholders and others to gain insight, influence and a share in decision-making processes on their own terms (Lund, 2011, op cit). This was a substantial and important step in the field of evaluation that went further than first, second and third generation approaches that focused on measurement, description and judgement respectively. Guba, E. G and Lincoln, Y. S (1989) *Fourth Generation Evaluation*, Sage

97 El Dessouky (2016) *Public Policy Evaluation Theory: From First to Fifth Generation* EPRA International Journal of Economic and Business Review, Vol 4, Issue 4, April. <http://bit.ly/2C8G0qm>

98 Reason and Torbert, (2001) op cit.

99 Coughlan, D and Brydon-Miller, M (2014) *The Sage Encyclopedia of Action Research*, Sage

100 Scharmer, O and Kaeufer, K (2015) *Awareness-Based Action Research: Catching Social Reality Creation in Flight*, in Bradbury, H (ed) *Handbook of Action Research* 3rd edition, Sage, London

They propose awareness-based action research, known as Theory U, that offers an attitude towards inquiry that integrates new qualities of listening and conversing to explore and let go of past patterns and practices.<sup>101</sup> Rooted in action science, the process redirects energies and attention to what can come into being by paying attention to the often neglected, invisible or unremarked aspects of a learning or change process. Scharmer and Kaeufer cite Edgar Schein in seeing the interconnectedness of diagnosis and intervention;

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**“Everything that you do in a system is an intervention ...and everything you experience is data about the system.”<sup>102</sup>**

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By exploring the deeper, individual and collective taken-for-granted assumptions and ways of being, it becomes possible to truly enter into an open and reflective dialogue about what might be co-created, then to test out ideas and get feedback through prototyping and ultimately to create something new.<sup>103</sup> Whilst there are stages to this journey through the ‘U’, they do not necessarily occur in a neat sequence. The stages offer a useful underlying framing or orientation for inquiry in different groups and systems.

In a similar way, Yoland Wadsworth identifies the importance of the act of co-inquiring as the dynamic of every living system. She offers a cyclical framing of a similar iterative inquiry process by talking of ‘inquiring full circle’ through observation, reflection, planning and action.<sup>104</sup> Wadsworth’s approach is especially helpful in thinking about how to build everyday co-inquiry capabilities and how ‘data’ can be best generated and tested; she respects research and evaluation-based evidence and balances it with a simultaneous regard for tacit, experiential and practical knowledge. She powerfully addresses the demeaning of ‘anecdotal evidence’, personal experience and the invisibility of much local, situated knowledge. Her work has done much to advance the understanding of the use of stories in evaluation and inquiry and she has published very useful examples of how to build-in inquiry that address different contexts, design issues and ways to use narrative.<sup>105</sup>

## Facilitation

Collective Leadership for Scotland uses facilitators to support action inquiry. There are many references in the literature to the presence and importance of the skilled facilitator role for the development of participatory practices in research and development and evidence from many action research and practice development initiatives that facilitation plays a key role in its success.<sup>106</sup> Different philosophies underpin styles and approaches to group process facilitation, for example, how the role of the facilitator is seen and how they use opportunities to build skills amongst participants and work with power dynamics.<sup>107</sup>

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102 Scharmer, O and Kaeufer, K (2015) op cit.

103 Ibid.

104 Wadsworth, Y (2011) op cit.

105 Ibid.

106 Dewar, B and Sharp, C (2013) Appreciative dialogue for co-facilitation in action research and practice development, in *International Practice Development Journal* 3 (2) [7]

107 Heft, L (2014) Facilitation in Coughlan, D and Brydon-Miller, M, *The Sage Encyclopedia of Action Research*, Sage

Whilst the elements of facilitation practice within complexity and in support of collective leadership are worthy of further exploration, a few examples from Scotland illustrate the potential of a more deliberate approach to facilitated collaborative inquiry, bringing new attention to the qualities of how people think, converse and interact, as part of the work in hand.

1

The East Lothian Partnership explored how to achieve better outcomes for vulnerable families in Musselburgh, as part of Musselburgh Total Place. Two Enabling Collaborative Leadership<sup>108</sup> facilitators worked with the Board and using an action inquiry approach, helped them to surface two compelling questions about local vulnerable families: ‘What is it like to be me in this family?’ and ‘What is it like to work with these families?’<sup>109</sup> The facilitators comment that “this seems to have helped the work be less abstract. They seem to be much more interested and open and there was more challenge. [The group] said that the inquiry process has ‘made a big difference to us... it’s stopped us rushing.’”

2

In Fife, a local partnership group focused on how it could be connecting more effectively to achieve best outcomes for children and families, with support from Enabling Collaborative Leadership facilitators, working alongside a local facilitator. The work had to overcome barriers of different perspectives and understanding of the issues and suspicion of a different way of working. Ultimately, the group has developed a more collective ethos and are building trusting relationships that underpin practice, leading to changes in their practical ways of working amongst social work and schools: ‘support to the group through an action inquiry approach and sticking with that... has created a better dynamic for work, which is a result of the positivity that has emerged from this programme.’

3

Collective Leadership for Scotland facilitators worked with a group of deputy directors within the Scottish Government, alongside some external stakeholders who were focusing on how they can work more effectively together towards the newly refreshed national performance outcomes. One of the participants comments that ‘we chose to work as a collective leadership group, considering this as a microcosm of the wider collective leadership on this outcome and adopting the model of action inquiry, offered by the facilitators. This felt uncomfortable to begin with, without the usual programme plan which would normally give us certainty of process. The agreement was to work in an emergent way, that allowed for gaining wider perspective and the opportunity to go deeper into themes and topics. We felt challenged into working differently, recognising that the task required us not to shy away from being open about the complexities, and we welcomed the support to stay in that space. The facilitators used different and innovative methods which held the uncertainty and we needed this in order not to fall back into usual ways of working.’

108 Enabling Collaborative Leadership or ‘Pioneer’ was the precursor programme to Collective Leadership.

109 Cited in Bland, N (2017) Pioneering Collaborative Leadership: A Facilitated Approach to Learning in Action, What Works Scotland, University of Edinburgh <http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/publications/pioneering-collaborative-leadership-a-facilitated-approach-for-learning-in-action/>

## Evaluative thinking and principles focused evaluation

The idea of fostering evaluative thinking, critical thinking and inquisitiveness rooted in a belief in the value of evidence, is becoming increasingly important in the field of evaluation, particularly amongst those interested in building evaluation capacity.<sup>110 111 112</sup> The combination of a reflective, embedded action inquiry process with a thirst for evidence to inform actions takes us into promising territory. Principles-focused evaluation offers an inquiry framework and focus for evaluative thinking. Michael Quinn Patton suggests that a good principle provides guidance for making choices and decisions, is useful in setting priorities, inspires and supports on-going development and adaptation. Principles provide rudders for navigating complex, dynamic systems.<sup>113</sup> The risk is that such articulation may be an after the event activity or be imposed by the requirements of funders and may not resonate with those most closely involved.

However, in the right conditions that are genuinely open to inquiry, action inquiry may play a part in helping a group to articulate meaningful principles for their work, as it commences and develops, so that they can consider the extent to which they are being adhered to in practice, and if so, how the espoused principles are leading to the desired results. Such practices of continuous inquiry, ‘reality-testing’ and seeking of evidence for claims are almost a form of continuous hypothesis testing.

Whilst not a blueprint, evaluative thinking draws on the tradition of developmental evaluation, that is collaborative, utilization-focused, undertaken in support of innovation and adaptation, applies complexity and systems thinking and creates timely feedback. It also draws on related traditions of empowerment evaluation and action evaluation.<sup>114</sup>

As a form of self and peer reflective inquiry, evaluative thinking seeks to increase the probability of success of a programme, by providing participants with tools for collective ‘goal inquiry’, developing programme theories of change and an approach to co-creating their jointly desired future. It can create an appetite for data as feedback and evidence, support collaborative meaning-making and help to develop understanding of actions or theories-in-use that are producing the results being seen; the original espoused theories of change and programme goals may, of course, be revised in the process. It can underpin both these formative, and any consequent summative judgements about the overall merit and success of the programme. In this way, it privileges insider-perspectives to support experimental action, so that insight and reflection are tested in action, and as an ethical basis for engaging with complex systems.

## Systemic action research

Danny Burns proposes systemic action research (SAR) with a focus on developing a systemic understanding of how change happens and how norms become established.<sup>115</sup> Seeing SAR as essentially about learning, he proposes that effective whole system change must combine four enmeshed processes; in-depth inquiry, multi-stakeholder analysis, experimental action and experiential learning, enacted across a wide terrain.

110 Quinn Patton, M 2018 op cit.

111 Vo, A. T. and Archibald, T (2018) New directions for evaluative thinking, in A. Vo & T. Archibald (Eds.), *Evaluative Thinking: New Directions for Evaluation*, 158, 139-147. doi:10.1002/ev.20317

112 See also <https://www.crs.org/sites/default/files/et-field-staff-identifying-assumptions-round-1-group-1.pdf>

113 Quinn Patton, M (2018) op cit.

114 Ibid.

115 Burns, D (2007) op cit.

These four elements are all important, on-going, interrelated strands of inquiry, not sequential processes. Methodologies of systemic action research have been extensively developed by Yoland Wadsworth and by the work of Danny Burns and Susan Weil at SOLAR and more recently by Danny Burns at IDS.<sup>116</sup> Notably, the element of experimental action (or prototyping in Theory U terms) sets action research apart from traditional social science research, by subjecting what might be reported as ‘research findings’ or ‘lessons from research’, to a further stage of testing in practice; almost a rediscovery of experimentation.

## Extending our understanding of appreciation

Amongst challenges inherent in any change or quality improvement process is the emotional challenge to inspire, energise and mobilise people by linking quality improvement to inner sentiments and deeper commitments.<sup>117</sup>

Although, emotions are always associated with actions and with human experiences of successful or failed communication, this ‘affective dimension’ has been relatively neglected within action research.<sup>118</sup> This includes a range of emotional states and behaviours that arise from them, including fear, anger, sadness, excitement, passion and courage.

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**“In the real world, emotions expressed through relationships to people and to things drive action in a way which often accounts for the failure of rational policy or for the reappearance of problems thought previously solved in new guises.”<sup>119</sup>**

Cottam, H. (2012)

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Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a developmental process rooted in the idea that our realities or social worlds are created by the language, interactions and relationships amongst us, including non-verbal communication and actions. It relies on the idea that in every society, organisation, family, group or community, something works, at least some of the time. An appreciative approach aims to discover what gives life to a system, what energises people and what they most care about to produce both shared knowledge and motivation for action.<sup>120</sup> Within the action research field and beyond, AI has often been narrowly understood, as almost evangelically focusing on the positive.<sup>121</sup>

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116 SOLAR (Social and Organisational Learning as Action Research) was a research and development team specialising in systemic action research originally established in 1996 by Susan Weil at University College Northampton. It moved to the University of the West of England in 2001, under the co-directorship of Danny Burns and Susan Weil. The Institute of Development Studies is part of the University of Sussex.

117 Bate, P. Mendel, P. and Robert, G (2008) *Organising for Quality: the improvement journeys of leading hospitals in Europe and the United States*, The Nuffield Trust

118 Haslebo, G and Haslebo, M. L (2012) *Practicing Relational Ethics in Organisations*, Taos

119 Cottam, H. (2012) From relational ideas to relational action, in Cooke, G and Muir, R, op cit.

120 Ludema, J. D. Cooperrider, D. L and Barrett, F. J (2001) *Appreciative Inquiry - the Power of the Unconditional Positive Question* in P. Reason and H. Bradbury. (eds), *Handbook of Action Research*, Sage

121 Sharp, C. Dewar, B and Barrie, K (2016) *Forming New Futures Through Appreciative Inquiry*, IRISS Insight No 33, <https://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/insights/forming-new-futures-through-appreciative-inquiry>

In reviewing critiques of AI, Gervase Bushe suggests that positivity, particularly positive emotion, is not sufficient for transformational change, but that rather, generativity is a key change lever in cases of transformational change.<sup>122</sup> Generativity is the processes and capacities that help people see old things in new ways.<sup>123</sup> The recent ‘critical turn’ in AI expands notions of appreciation beyond the idea of positivity to include valuing more explicit forms of inquiry, building participants’ aspirations to design new social systems and acting in new ways to embed change.<sup>124</sup>

Appreciative Inquiry uses language and communication in ways that bring out and highlight collaborative experiences, competencies and practical wisdom. Gitte Haslebo and Maya Loua Haslebo highlight the idea of social recognition as a basic form of appreciation and this seems particularly pertinent to enacting collective leadership. Social recognition acknowledges someone’s social value to the community, that involves acknowledging the value of their unique abilities, skills and contributions, and expressing respect.<sup>125</sup> It implies mutual moral obligations to cooperation and participation, particularly crucial in a work context that require successful coordination and multiple contributions to achieve results, across hierarchies of position, professional rank and sectors.

Helpfully for this discussion of collective leadership, Gitte Haslebo and Maya Loua Haslebo also make a useful distinction between praise and appreciation, which are related in common-sense terms; in essence, praise is about someone, usually in a managerial or supervisory

position, assessing the performance of others, based on some standards or assumptions, not necessarily made explicit. Whilst it may be pleasing and reassuring to both parties, praise often offers no information to the recipient about exactly what made the performance so good.<sup>126</sup>

This more nuanced understanding of appreciation, combined with inquiry, means that the concept of appreciation takes on new meaning based on the belief that everyone has a contribution to make and has an intrinsic motivation. Importantly, mutual inquiry is as significant as appreciation, clearly positioning appreciation as a relational and collaborative practice. Ken Gergen suggests that much critical social research has failed to explore the imaginative possibilities and so limited ‘future forming’ potential. The focus on critique has played a part in inciting resistance, yet it tends also to discredit its targets, galvanize its opposition and lends itself to increased polarization. He proposes an integration of the ‘incitement for change’ of critical inquiry, the ‘co-creativity’ and ‘imagination’ of appreciative inquiry and the ‘collaborative’ and ‘practice focus’ of action research.<sup>127</sup>

Without rejecting the place of critique, focusing on creating space for inquiry, including exploring achievements and valued practices as well as difficulties, can contribute to a group’s ability to understand, and bring into being its collective aspirations. The focus is on understanding the ‘here and now’; exploring what is working well when we are doing our best, as a basis for building positive developments, and seeking adaptation, rather than proving attribution and demonstrating fidelity.<sup>128</sup>

122 Bushe, G. R and Kassam, A. F. (2005). When is appreciative inquiry transformational? A Meta Case Analysis, *The Journal of Applied Behavioural Science*, Vol 41, (No 2), 161-181

123 Bushe, G.R. (2013) Generative process, generative outcome: The transformational potential of appreciative inquiry, in D.L. Cooperrider, D.P. Zandee, L.N. Godwin, M. Avital & B. Boland (eds.) *Organizational Generativity: The Appreciative Inquiry Summit and a Scholarship of Transformation* (Advances in Appreciative Inquiry, Volume 4), Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 89–113.

124 Ridley-Duff, R., J and Duncan, G. (2015) What is critical appreciation? Insights from studying the critical turn in an appreciative inquiry, *Human Relations*, 1–21

125 Haslebo and Haslebo (2012) op cit.

126 Ibid.

127 Gergen, K (2014) op cit.

128 This focus on the here and now, has parallels with the idea of Beisser’s ‘paradoxical theory of change’, that by rejecting the idea of leading change, we make meaningful change possible and that coercion or pushing for change often causes resistance <http://www.gestalt.org/arnie.htm>



By building on the best of what is, it becomes possible to learn from and distil from moments of everyday complexity what is desirable and possible. A complexity lens also brings a new perspective on appreciation as a driver of emergence through the seeking out of aspiration and passion – visions and actions to lift the spirits, provide energy and create momentum. We are too often more familiar with the opposite:

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**“When cynicism becomes the default language, playfulness and invention become impossible. Cynicism scours through a culture like bleach, wiping out millions of small, seedling ideas.”** <sup>129</sup>

Moran, C (2017)

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Influenced by some of this thinking, myself and others have proposed a model of appreciative action research (AAR) based on the My Home Life approach.<sup>130 131</sup> It identifies and celebrates individual and mutual successes to create a positive, relational language of inquiry and dialogue. Rooted in social constructivism, it values, but goes beyond ‘storytelling’, by promoting an approach to collaborative learning-in-action, that develops the capacity of people to address their own issues and solve their own problems:

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**“...[we think that Appreciative Action Research] ...offers a significant chance to integrate the affective realm more explicitly. It does so through attention to the role of emotions, feelings and intuitions, but perhaps specifically to the place of positive emotion, which provides intelligence about what people truly care about. This can be a tool to develop motivation and overcome many of the limitations and barriers of our own dominant cultures that overlook or denigrate positive exchange and feedback, the acknowledgement of emotion in the workplace and discussion of values.”** <sup>132</sup>

Sharp, C and Dewar, B (2017)

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AAR uses the relationships between people to generate on-going dialogue and peer support, feedback and recognition of existing strengths and assets, what is valued and active achievements from change processes, to both excite and incite further change. Appreciative action researchers effectively become self and peer ‘participant observers’ of their own practice as they study themselves and others ‘in action’ and seek examples of what is changing as a result of their approach.

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<sup>129</sup> <https://www.brainpickings.org/2017/09/21/caitlin-moran-cynicism/>

<sup>130</sup> Dewar, B, McBride, A and Sharp, C (2017) Person-centred research, in McCormack, B and McCance, T Person-Centred Practice in Nursing and Health Care (2nd ed.) Wiley-Blackwell

<sup>131</sup> Sharp, C, Dewar, B, Barrie, K and Meyer, J (2017) How being appreciative creates change – theory in practice from health and social care in Scotland, Action Research, On-line First, <http://bit.ly/2qtAoho>

<sup>132</sup> Sharp, C and Dewar, B (2017) Learning in Action: Extending Our Understanding of Appreciative Inquiry, in Zuber-Skerrett, O (ed) Conferences as Sites of Learning and Development: Using Participatory Action Learning and Action Research Approaches, Routledge

# 8 Practising change together – towards 5th generation evaluation



These strands of building-in facilitated collaborative inquiry, evaluative thinking, experimental action across a system and a generative appreciation are vital parts of a model of practising change together.

Whilst there is a risk of seeing such attention to learning processes as at odds with working with people or simply getting on with the job, the examples illustrate some of the possibilities and the hurdles to be overcome. It is not simply a question about being more observant of ourselves in action; as ‘we do not think and talk about what we see; we see what we are able to think and talk about’<sup>133</sup>. Nor is it about starting from scratch each time, but about considering how best to adapt or customise evidence-based interventions or programmes (‘translated’ from elsewhere) as well as providing new evidence of how things are working, and might work better, in the new context. These kinds of integrated and continuous inquiry processes can breathe life into programmes and interventions, by creating headspace and time for dialogue, in which people ask good questions, work across boundaries and become more effective in their joint efforts.

## Navigation aids and new working assumptions

Gro Emmerson Lund has provided an initial account of the need for and potential shaping of 5th generation evaluation and an exploration of the ethics of evaluation from a social constructionist perspective.<sup>134 135</sup> As a response to traditional evaluation practice, 5th generation evaluation seeks to strengthen working relations and the coordination of actions; ‘5th generation evaluation takes into account relationships and the moral purposes of the organisation or working community, so 5th generation evaluation is not just about creating something better, but also about not making things worse’.<sup>136</sup>

Developing this and in recognition of the debt to SOLAR and to Joe Raelin’s summary of the shared underpinnings of the family of action strategies,<sup>137</sup> it becomes possible to propose some working assumptions or ‘provocative propositions’ that can help us to navigate this terrain, perhaps of a fledgling ‘5th generation approach’ to inquiry. ‘Provocative propositions’ are symbolic statements used in appreciative inquiry to provoke or generate thinking and action, made in bold, positive terms to stretch, challenge and encourage innovation.<sup>138</sup> As a practical tool, these provocations might be used with a group in the earliest stages, perhaps establishing a bespoke set of values and principles of how they wish to work together, in their collective leadership.

Possible inquiry questions might be:

- a) What excites, interests or resonates with you (in what you’ve read/these provocations)?
- b) What values and qualities would you want to take into the future?
- c) And if that were to happen, what might it look like in practice? What would be the implications for you, your close collaborators or team and the wider system of which you are a part?
- d) What would you/we need to let go of? Who and what will help us to discard those things we no longer want?

133 Schein, E. H (2013) *Humble Inquiry - The gentle art of asking instead of telling*, Berrett-Koehler

134 Lund, G E (2011) op cit.

135 Lund, G.E. (2012) *Morgendagens vejledende etiske principper for evaluering*. I: *EvalueringsNyt*, 28. udgave, juli, 2012. (Translated into English: *Tomorrow’s Guiding Ethical Principles for Evaluation*. [http://www.haslebo-partnere.dk/view.php?template=normal&page\\_id=219](http://www.haslebo-partnere.dk/view.php?template=normal&page_id=219))

136 Lund, G. E (2018) personal communication

137 Raelin, J (2009) *Seeking Conceptual Clarity in the Action Modalities*, *Action Learning: Research and Practice* Vol. 6, No. 1

138 Cooperrider, D.L. Whitney, D & Stavros, J.M (2003) *The appreciative inquiry handbook*. Bedford Heights, OH: Lakeshore Communications.

In the next section, the provocations are numbered to distinguish them from each other - there is no particular order in this list; however, the understanding that inquiry is a form of intervening must be a defining feature of 5th generation evaluation and one that is shared with action research.

## Future forming and action focused

- 1 **Treat inquiry as a form of intervening, not a separate, detached process:** we adopt a reflective stance and endorse self and peer participant observation and self-evaluation to increase the probability of success of a programme.

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- 2 **Be practical and pragmatic:** learning is available to us in the very work that we are involved in as we engage and improvise around uncertain and complex problems in our work environment or community.

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- 3 **Adopt a future forming focus:** we believe that what we focus on becomes our reality – we get more of what we study. A focus on the shared desirable future is a better guiding star for evaluation and learning than a focus on what went right or wrong in the past, and why.

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- 4 **Embrace complexity:** we don't rush to problem-solve but take time to understand problems and issues in our local system from multiple perspectives and create feedback loops to enable our real-time learning.

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- 5 **Emphasise systemic thinking, rather than systematic inquiry:** we seek knowledge directly useful to our actions, rather than as a stable description of the field of inquiry. We are systematic in the sense of seeking to co-create knowledge based on a variety of perspectives.

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- 6 **Support experimental action:** we test out working assumptions and new ideas in practice and gather evidence of the impact. We seek to nudge or perturb the system and keep testing. We pay close attention to understanding the unintended consequences of actions within organisational systems.

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- 7 **Seek the stories behind every action:** as participants, we are observers of experience – our own and others - and recognise that we make interpretations of actions as they occur, rather than see ourselves as controllers of our environment.

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- 8 **Value the articulation of desired outcomes to develop our shared purpose and goals:** we seek to be accountable for our learning, rather than for specific outcomes.

## Relational and appreciative

9

**Take a relational perspective:** we work from a position of positive regard, intrinsic motivation and agency and assume that everybody has good reasons to behave the way they do, seen from their own perspective. We assume agency, not passivity – everyone is co-responsible, competent and obligated members of the organisation. This shifts the focus from individuals to relationships and to our various and shared visions of a better future.

10

**Work with care:** we seek to promote relationships and avoid damaging them in the process of creating useful knowledge.

11

**Promote appreciative dialogue:** we seek to understand what is working well and what is valued in the ‘here and now’ to support emergence and explore aspirations. This understanding is the foundation for the future and having fresh eyes and ears helps to check whether our existing practices support and motivate us in our vision to build a better future. We recognise that ‘improvement’ may not always be needed.

12

**Recognise that ‘words create worlds’:** we believe that the language we use creates our realities, so we seek to pay attention to how our language might position people and the inter-play between language, power and emotion.

13

**Promote generativity:** this helps people to listen with empathy and see old issues with new eyes. We recognise the part that emotion plays in creating cultures and seek to integrate acknowledgement of our feelings more explicitly into our work.

## Collaborative inquiry

14

**Focus on real-time learning through collaborative inquiry:** we reflect-in-action to discover more about our thinking and actions. This supports us to question our underlying assumptions and values to improve our immediate interactions and allows us to examine tacit or previously undiscussed assumptions and patterns of behaviour and reasoning.

15

**Talk about how to be comfortable with uncertainty, tentativeness and adopt humility in inquiry:** we recognise and work with the complexity, ambiguity, uncertainty, paradox, tensions and contradictions revealed by inquiry as offering vital opportunities to learn. We resist certainties, closure and finality through precise measurement or hasty judgement of the phenomena we observe.

16

**Explore theory:** we believe that theory helps us conceptualise our experience in ways that may be useful for ourselves and others; through inquiry, we can develop, and test out new theory based on our experience and communicate what we learn, in ways that make sense to us. Inquiry is an opportunity to test existing research and theory and to create new contributions to knowledge.

## Participation, co-production and knowledge co-creation

17

**Be a participant, not a spectator:** we are ‘active learners.’ We anticipate that inquiry will lead to changes in ourselves and the wider system of which we are a part.

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18

**Mobilise the competencies of all participants in inquiry and build skills and capacities in inquiry practices:** we can create new social capital and connection. We are always learning and seek to acknowledge and build on existing strengths, skills and capacities.

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19

**Engage widely:** we adopt a participatory view of knowledge, that knowledge arises through our interactions and reflections on real-world experience and seek diversity of perspectives, bringing in different kinds of expertise, lived experience and previously unheard voices.

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20

**Seek multiple and diverse perspectives:** each of us is one expert amongst many. We are not looking for one truth, and we do not consider the belief in objectivity a sound basis for development and change. We work across boundaries and seek to learn from the complexity and richness of social behaviour.

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21

**Let the system own the outcomes:** our contributions to outcomes are likely to be at multiple levels, arising from our collaboration. It is probably unnecessary, undesirable or impossible to seek to isolate our contributions from those of others.

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22

**Seek data using multiple methods:** we are methodological pluralists, but particularly value narrative, creative and visual methods to deepen inquiry, give voice and enhance participation.

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23

**Value evidence of all kinds and seek to use it to create dialogue:** in particular, we value data generation and sense-making methods that create a dialogue and enable shared meaning making. We see data analysis as an ongoing process to help us understand what happens over time and use it to create further insights in ways that open up new possibilities for change.

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24

**Seek partnership in working relations:** we rarely work alone, even if we think we can.

# 9

**An invitation  
to dialogue –  
how are we  
practising  
change  
together?**





There are of course, many implications and questions that will arise from this paradigm shift, not all of which have yet been aired and which warrant fuller discussion and elaboration.

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**“It has taken me a long time to unlearn the art of using questions as clubs with which to bludgeon other people.”<sup>139</sup>**

Pierce, W. B (2007)

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For Collective Leadership for Scotland, this alludes to a number of immediately pertinent questions about the purposes of inquiry and the role and skills of facilitation, where there is a need to emphasise emergent design and process, personal relationships, trust building and the creative use of tools to support reflection and ongoing learning. There are questions about the role of former ‘evaluators’, (now often termed ‘learning partners’ or ‘critical friends’) and their relationship to those with a role to support group process, as coaches or facilitators. These roles have conventionally been distinct, although group process facilitators are usually more likely to be present at the initial stages:

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**“The success or failure of an action research venture often depends on what happens at the beginning of the inquiry process: in the way access is established, and on how participants and co-researchers are engaged early on. ‘Opening communicative space’ is important because, however we base our theory and practice of action research, the first steps are fateful.”<sup>140</sup>**

Gayá Wicks, P and Reason, P (2009)

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The need to assess the quality of timely action in complex situations requires a way of thinking about ‘rigour’ or quality that goes beyond conventional social science notions of validity, reliability and generalisability; quality has multiple dimensions or ‘choice points’ to guide collaborative actions, that must include concerns for the quality of relationships amongst the primary stakeholders and the extent to which all stakeholders are included.<sup>141</sup> There is also a concern for actionability, that individual and shared insights should go further to catalyse and enable action.<sup>142</sup> A key point is that quality requires these choices to be made transparent:

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<sup>139</sup> Pierce, W. B (2007) op cit.

<sup>140</sup> Gayá Wicks, P and Reason, P (2009) Initiating action research, Challenges and paradoxes of opening communicative space, Action Research, Volume 7(3)

<sup>141</sup> Bradbury-Huang, H (2014) Quality, in Coughlan, D and Brydon-Miller, M, op cit.

<sup>142</sup> In developing ideas about 5th generation evaluation, there is scope to review and extend the 4th generation authenticity criteria developed by Guba and Lincoln (1989) op cit.

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**“Quality in inquiry comes from awareness of and transparency about the choices open to you and the choices you are making at each stage of the inquiry... Sometimes in action research what is most important is how we can help articulate voices that have been silenced. How do we draw people together in conversation when they were not before?”** <sup>143</sup>

Reason, P (2006)

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In such new territory, we need navigation aids to support agility, experimentation and adaption, rather than concrete plans, implemented with persistence using defined methods. Even so, there inevitably are questions about methods. For example, whether there is a place for some methodological practices, such as theories of change or linear logic models, that are attempts to address issues of attribution and the difficulties of establishing causality. These risk still treating problems as if they are complicated rather than complex; neglecting the context and interdependencies may hinder a systemic view of change, perhaps creating oversimplification and false certainty, yet they may well have a place if used to explicitly test theories in practice. Michael Quinn Patton makes the point that ‘evaluation grew up in the projects’ – and remains in the grip of a self-limiting project mentality. Tools that works well for a project evaluation do not work well for evaluating complex, dynamic interventions.<sup>144</sup>

It has become common for researchers and evaluators, particularly those originally schooled in quantitative methods, to embrace the idea of multi-methods. Whilst valuing both qualitative and quantitative evidence is important, in seeking to understand the dynamics of change, it will be necessary to look for small-scale signs of change beginning to emerge. This is more likely to be detected by sharing perspectives and experience of those most closely involved, exploring their experience through various forms of narrative inquiry and collective meaning making; subjecting it to shared scrutiny and reappraisal.

The challenge for Collective Leadership for Scotland is to find ways to make the usually hidden elements of the change process part of the conversations, in the midst of ‘work-as-we-are-doing-it’, in order to increase areas of choice for individuals and groups. Establishing some sort of agreed ways of working, transparent and open to review, is a powerful way to articulate the desire to challenge prevailing norms and power dynamics; to stop us ‘crashing through the woods.’ It can help to establish positive ways of relating that enable exploration of perhaps previously uncharted territory; for example, our achievements and valued practices; our perceptions and the distortions, denials and projections we construct (whether we are aware of them or not); how we use language and our awareness of feelings and energies, both positive and negative, as a source of valuable intelligence.

Facilitated action inquiry can hold the key to developing such new knowledge and an adaptive, collaborative and improvisational skill-set, able to respond in new ways to systemic and complex issues on the ground. It’s common to hear the expression ‘it’s all about relationships’ and it is clearly time to shift our focus to relationships; not relationships as ‘things’, but as co-created and dynamic relational processes in which we are embedded. In this way we can bring new qualities to our talking to each other about our various and shared visions of a better future.

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<sup>143</sup> Reason, P (2006) Choice and Quality in Action Research Practice, *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 15(2)

<sup>144</sup> Quinn Patton, M (2018) op cit.

Collective Leadership for Scotland is led by a small collaborative team who are tasked with the ongoing delivery, growth and development of the Collective Leadership offer across the country.

# Collective Leadership Core Team



## Janet Whitley

**Janet leads on strategic leadership and partnership development for Collective Leadership for Scotland.**

She joined the Scottish Government in 2010 and manages the Ingage Division which supports transformation across public services. This involves working closely with the Scottish Leaders Forum and leading on Workforce Scotland, which has developed a suite of collaborative learning offers aligned to the needs of Public Service Reform as defined through the Christie Commission. Much of this work involves working closely with an extended team of collaborative partners across public service organisations.



## Dot McLaughlin

**Dot is a facilitator for Collective Leadership for Scotland and works with leadership teams across the country.**

She is responsible for the development of work within the collective leadership sites and provides ongoing support. Before this, Dot worked for the Improvement Service for ten years. She has a background in social work, working with young people in, and moving through, care, as well as managing hospital and community-based services for people with learning disabilities.



## Karen Lawson

**Karen leads on the development of facilitation for Collective Leadership for Scotland.**

Alongside this, she has a lead role in developing and managing Workforce Scotland's annual Fire Starter Festival. Karen is Collaborative Learning Lead within Scottish Government, where she started working in 2015 to develop collaborative and innovation approaches to support public service transformation.



## Keira Oliver

**Keira leads on Research and Learning for Collective Leadership for Scotland.**

She is a facilitator and Principal Social Researcher within the Scottish Government. Since 2015, Keira has led on the Scottish Government support of u.lab, a change leadership programme, convening the ulabscot holding team and co-facilitating the u.lab hub host programme.



## Allison Trimble

Allison Trimble is from The Kings Fund and is working in partnership with the core team.

She is a personal, organisational and system development consultant with more than 25 years' experience in the regeneration, health and social care sectors. Alison has extensive experience of working with senior leaders in the public sector as well as working with third sector and community-based leaders. She draws on a range of system development approaches including whole systems and psychodynamic ideas.

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## Eliat Aram

The Core Team engages in supervision with Eliat Aram, Chief Executive Officer of the Tavistock Institute.

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## Cathy Sharp

We are delighted to have worked with Cathy Sharp on this publication. Cathy is Director of Research for Real, based in Edinburgh.

Cathy is Director of Research for Real, based in Edinburgh. As a leading practitioner of action research in Scotland, she aspires to change the ways that practitioners think about research and researchers think about practice. Cathy is actively engaged in the cultural challenges of public service reform and leadership development in Scotland, working to support more appreciative and facilitative practice with a wide range of people, organisations and communities. She is involved in several leadership development programmes to support collaborative leadership and health and social care integration, alongside other work to support inquiry amongst young people and asset-based and appreciative approaches to community development and health inequalities. Cathy is an experienced social researcher and former academic and research manager.

[www.research-for-real.co.uk](http://www.research-for-real.co.uk)







**Collective  
Leadership**