

Pioneering Collaborative Leadership: A Facilitated Approach to Learning in Action



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**Research Report
Summary**

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The Pioneering Collaborative Leadership (PCL) initiative is testing an innovative approach to developing the practice of collaborative leadership for public service innovation by leaders in public services. It is part of a programme of work by Workforce Scotland¹. This briefing is drawn from a report² that reviews the experience of delivering PCL over its first 18 months. It focuses on learning from PCL's work with East Lothian Partnership about local services in Musselburgh for vulnerable families and incorporates learning from early work with three other sites.

Introduction

The agenda set out by the Christie Commission in 2011 continues to be an important 'touchstone' for efforts to reform public services in Scotland. However, despite evident ambition and commitment, it appears from a range of evidence that the transformation of structures, cultures and practices to achieve the Commission's recommendations remains a challenge. Pioneer seeks to make a distinct contribution within the diverse range of approaches and tools promoted and applied to support the reform of public services in Scotland. Pioneer provides skilled facilitators to work alongside existing or new partnerships on 'live' collaborative challenges. Their facilitation focuses on building the capacity for individuals and groups to reflect and learn about collaboration, as they do it.

The PCL approach

PCL is aimed at those already working within, and sometimes beyond, their own organisation to:

- improve public services and achieve better outcomes working cooperatively with individuals and communities
- seek opportunities to build effective collaborative relationships then manage those relationships to build trust, confidence and credibility
- think beyond the constraints of current ways of working, actively seeking the views of others and encouraging creativity and innovation
- use evidence to inform development and recognise the potential to build evidence from current practice
- share knowledge and information to obtain best value from it across public services³

¹ Workforce Scotland is collaboration to develop the workforce across public services. It is a workstream of the Scottish Leaders Forum, a network of senior leaders from central and local government, public services and the third sector. Details of the organisation and governance of Pioneer can be found in the full report. See footnote 2.

² <http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/publications/pioneering-collaborative-leadership-a-facilitated-approach-for-learning-in-action>

³ Pioneer 'offer' document- 'Enabling Collaborative Leadership Pioneer Programme 2015, Briefing for teams – phase 1'.

In its first 18 months, PCL was delivered by a small core group of facilitators working through individual arrangements with their employing public service organisation. This position reflects the overall resourcing approach to PCL which seeks to be self-sustaining by relying primarily on sharing existing resource across public services.

The facilitators seek to prompt inquiry into shared questions that relate to three levels of action in collaborative leadership.

- Personal learning from inquiring into personal acts of leadership ('my learning').
- Collective learning from inquiring together about the quality of collaborative leadership in a team ('our learning').
- Learning about the wider system within which a team is working.

Case study: Musselburgh Total Place

The East Lothian Partnership established the Musselburgh Total Place Pilot in 2014 to explore how better outcomes could be achieved for the most vulnerable families living in the area. Following detailed data collection and analysis, every intervention that six specific families had with public sector agencies was mapped. However, there was a sense of uncertainty about what to do next in response to the emerging picture this data was creating and PCL was invited to help take the Musselburgh Total Place work forward.

A conventional project structure was established: a project board, a project team, and a project manager tasked with managing the work. The project board, chaired by the council chief executive, included senior managers from several council departments, a representative from the local high school, the police, NHS, and a local third sector organisation. The project team was made up of middle managers from the same organisations. The board met regularly on a monthly basis.

Beginning collaborative work, establishing the facilitation

To build their credibility and gain the trust of the group, the facilitators first needed to build an understanding of the PCL approach and what their role would be. This was crucial to allowing them to make a range of delicate and sensitive 'interventions' in board meetings. Initially, facilitation was integrated into the structure and agenda of the meetings, yet distinguished from 'normal business'. The facilitators sought to establish action inquiry as a routine practice in meetings by explicitly 'holding the space' for inquiry, and continually calling attention to the questions that were coming up in discussions as well as the overall ambitions of the project. Facilitators would then hold back from further contribution to let the group discussion develop itself.

"When to contribute to early board meetings requires sensitive and careful judgement about whether an input brings a constructive element to the group process and to the way people reflect about how they are working. In practice, it involves delicate interactional skill, tact and diplomacy."

Supporting new ways of working

Pioneer supported members of the board and project team to take time and hold the space for reflection in meetings, develop a deeper shared understanding of the experience for families, and focus on collective 'meaning-making'.

There was a particularly significant moment when the board learnt that 27 different local service practitioners had worked with one family, and the board took time to pause and reflect on the implications of that information. The facilitators supported different kinds of discussion and invited the board to a deeper reflection on the experiences of vulnerable families and how public services could truly respond. From this, the board identified two important inquiry questions to directly hear the voice and experiences of families and practitioners. The questions were:

‘What is it like to be ‘me’ in this family?’

‘What is it like to be a practitioner working with this family?’

The facilitators identified this as the crucial point in their work with the board, when there was a shift in perspective and the project moved into a period of active inquiry:

“...we’d done a lot of work of trying to hold them in that inquiry space, and then when those questions started to crystallise, and then the work started to, kind of, flow.”

Capturing the learning

One of the facilitators kept a ‘learning log’ of every board meeting that recorded the questions, reflections and learning that were surfaced and discussed by board members. The look, feel and purpose of the logs was very different from the formal meeting minutes. Maintaining a learning log was quite a commitment, but it provided a group record, which served as a resource for members to use to support their own learning.

The outcome of the collaboration

The collaborative work with PCL has supported the board to work in different ways that they feel has strengthened collaboration. It led them to make decisions about new models of service delivery and agree new joint resourcing arrangements. The new model of service has been strongly informed by the voice of the families that came back through the exercise to focus clearly on the two central inquiry questions.

A couple of partners were not able to sustain a consistent commitment to the collaboration, and were less closely involved in the collective process of ‘meaning-making’ about the experience of families. This had implications for how easily joint resourcing decisions for the new model of service could be agreed latterly.

What is PCL learning about facilitating collaborative leadership?

The report consolidates the learning from PCL’s work in Musselburgh with learning from early experience with three other sites that did not progress to longer-term partnership, to provide a picture of the conditions required to establish a successful PCL collaboration.

Entering into a collaboration

Engaging with potential PCL sites can take a number of months, involving a series of meetings to communicate the offer, and requiring significant time commitment from facilitators. Facilitators need to build local understanding of PCL, and their own personal credibility. This is not easy and requires early relationship-building and sometimes the delicate application of challenge, to test whether there is the necessary local understanding and commitment to engage with the PCL approach. There is a risk that as PCL is a ‘free’ offer, there is less incentive for sites to think hard about the benefits of Pioneer and whether they can commit.

A set of local ‘minimal conditions’ supports PCL entry into sites. In addition to a wide constituency of support, sites need local advocates and senior champions who understand and value the contribution PCL can make, but this alone is not sufficient to drive the success of PCL. The facilitators can influence conditions to some degree by communicating a clear offer, modelling the facilitator role in practice and offering flexibility to fit the local context. At an early stage, facilitators may wish to judge whether minimal conditions are present or can be built.

Successful facilitation

The reflections of Pioneer facilitators point to the importance of certain personal qualities in facilitators:

- Personal confidence, relational ‘maturity’, a sophisticated understanding of collaborative group process.
- Knowledge and experience of applying a range of techniques and approaches.
- Resilience and emotional intelligence to negotiate the challenges of entering sites, negotiating collaboration, and sustaining engagement.

There are also distinct benefits to facilitators working in pairs. This provides the opportunity for mutual support – both practical and emotional – and peer review and shared reflection about their experiences with sites. It meant there can be division of labour in attending site meetings and preparing and doing facilitation and pairs can offer a broader mix of facilitation skill, technique and experience.

Challenges

PCL’s resourcing model requires it to find facilitators for whom PCL has a strong congruence with existing commitments, and be supported in their organisation to do that. It has succeeded over the time frame of the report with a highly-committed core group of facilitators, and took steps to build a wider facilitation network to build additional capacity. A sustainable route to the right mix of facilitation skills is crucial for the development of PCL.

All the facilitators reflect positively on the growth and development of their own facilitation practice; it has gone to a higher level. They can exemplify and model a sophisticated range of collaborative behaviours. But there is a risk of a widening gap in expertise – and the confidence that stems from it – between this group and any new facilitators expressing interest in joining PCL. It is increasingly important for this facilitation skill and experience to be passed on to new facilitators to increase the capability of people in that pool.

Conclusion

PCL offers a specific contribution among the range of offers available to public services attempting to put the Christie agenda into practice. That contribution is its focus on collaboration and leadership, and its ‘delivery model’ which takes it to the heart of local issues and collaborative challenges. But it has been relatively modest so far in its claims and in promoting its offer. Now may be the right moment to seek to become more visible in the wider Scottish public service system and to consider how a wider constituency might best be introduced to the insights and learning that this report documents.

For further information about PCL see workforcotland.com