

Co-design is Cool

Simon Rosenberg

At this time of year, the media often run filler stories, such as what is “in” and “out”. If the human services sector did the same, “co-design” would definitely be high on the “in” list. Co-design is cool. I predict that in a year or two, strategic plans and annual reports in both government and non-government agencies will be full of the phrase.

And that’s the problem. We are increasingly seeing a lot of uncritical use of the term. I recently heard two senior people discussing what was really a token consultation with a group of service users. They were calling it co-design. The risk is that without some rigour in our understanding, co-design becomes a must-have accessory that no human services leader wants to be seen without. “Co-design is in danger of being applied to any client engagement activities, and this in turn dilutes its potentially radical contribution.” (1) To some extent, this is already the fate of “collaboration” and “person-centred”.

I have been involved with two significant co-designed projects in Canberra recently: the Strengthening Families project (aka “Improving Services with Families”), and Corrections Throughcare. Both were established with the intent of engaging service users and deliverers in the design process, to try to get a better result. Both were also about the community sector and government engaging together in unfamiliar ways. And both succeeded. This experience provides some lessons for co-design, if it is really going to work, and be worthy of the name.

Be clear on the purpose

This is about a vision that is shared amongst all the co-design players, and a determination to start from there and “build backwards”, rather than focus on current problems. This enables potentially radical thinking about what can be achieved, not the usual incremental approach. For Corrections Throughcare, the problem was obvious: prisoners were being released with little or no supports. So with our ACT Government partners, we went straight to inventing the solution.

Be flexible about the “who”

One of the exciting things about co-design is the potential to draw on many ideas and perspectives, and to challenge the way we do business. This also means deliberately involving more than ‘the usual suspects.’ Some of the best ideas emerging through Strengthening Families were from families themselves, and front line staff, who would not normally have been engaged in what might be seen as policy work. As Burkett notes: “Co-design processes thrive when boundaries are flexible and silos are broken down, when real listening and dialogue can occur across unlikely alliances.” (2)

Be clear on the scope

I would argue that co-design is particularly useful for ‘transformative’ processes. Strengthening Families has the potential to radically change the way we not only deliver services, but relate to service users. It could shift the focus of control to families as genuine partners in service design, delivery and review, rather than as passive recipients. That said, co-design can equally be applied to something more limited, where the aim is just to improve an aspect of a service experience, such as client access, or how referrals are working. The key thing is to involve all the affected parties in an open way.

Be prepared to work differently, and take risks

Co-design requires a new culture - 'getting the soft stuff right' - including enhanced levels of trust. This is about working outside the usual hierarchies and roles, and being prepared to share power in ways that may be uncomfortable and challenging, and require courage. Corrections Throughcare involved a process of 'letting go' by senior policy officers in ACT Government. They let us into the policy development tent, and were very frank about sharing sensitive ideas which ultimately ended up in a Cabinet submission. This worked because the community sector participants were clear about government process and roles, and did not breach the trust that senior officials had invested in us. The result was better government decision-making, which also had sector ownership.

Take time

Co-design is a good tool for the more complex or 'wicked' problems, which are rarely solved through a quick fix. In addition, building effective and trusting relationships with all participants can not be rushed. This can give rise to concerns about the use of people's time and resources, but is best considered as an investment, which will pay off through improved social impact. The Corrections Throughcare process took 3 years to get to the implementation stage. The recently commenced Human Services Blueprint process is already incorporating elements of co-design, and will probably take some years to embed.

Acquire the skills

Like collaboration, co-design doesn't just happen. Whether it is service users, community sector staff or government officials, everyone needs the skills, capacity, support and authority to effectively participate. Strengthening Families involved all three parties, but was aided by a strong consultancy team, who understood co-design and assisted everyone to acquire the skills to participate effectively. Corrections Throughcare took as long as it did partly because we were all 'learning on the job'.

Finally, a plea to ensure that co-design does not stop at design. Too many great ideas have faltered because of poor implementation. Well designed services and programs will work better if the partnerships created during the design phase are sustained. This also means involving service users – and all key players - in any review.

- (1) Ingrid Burkett, "Co-designing for Social Good: The radial potential of co-design for civil society organisations", The Centre for Social Impact blog, 4 Feb 2013.
- (2) Ibid.