Inspired
Working

four days to
imagine better
and make it happen
6~7 October
and 3~4 November 2005
Cairndale Hotel, Dumfries

"The key to change is
imagining better"
Michael Kendrick

NHS
Dumfries
& Galloway

Dumfries
& Galloway
COUNCIL

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Our assumptions

All of us are in this work - at least in part - to make things better.

We can't make things better on our own, but have to work with other professionals and with the people who rely on our services.

Making things better is difficult, both because the sort of social and health problems people have are tough and because the culture and structure we work in is problematic.

This programme is not directly about the social and health problems which we are employed to alleviate, but about finding more sustainable and productive ways of working in this complex environment.

How we understand inspiration

We chose inspiration as the guiding theme for this course, because inspiration has been so significant to us in our working lives. The context for our discussion of inspiration is the familiar territory of leadership, change and working together, and we hope to illuminate these by following the elusive thread of inspiration.

We will be talking about inspiration not as an 'aha!' moment of discovery or creativity or as a momentary 'feelgood' factor - but as an enduring source of direction and energy. Inspiration sustains us in difficult work, and we in turn have to sustain and nurture inspiration, for ourselves and for others.

The word inspire and inspiration come from an Indo-European word 'speis' meaning simply breathe, through Latin and French to English. The concept of inspiration became of great interest to Christian scholars who argued that the Bible was the result of divine inspiration where God 'breathed in' the words to its human authors. But inspiration can come from many sources and a useful working definition of 'inspire' is

"infuse or animate with an idea or purpose"

Inspiration is different from motivation in that it is internal and concerned with purpose. Organisations and managers often seek to motivate people with rewards (including psychological rewards such as praise) or threats. People don't become inspired by rewards or threats, only by the intrinsic value of the work.

Inspiration is not in itself a good thing - people can be infused or animated with a bad idea or evil purpose:

"The best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

Unless people are in some way animated with a purpose it is unlikely that they will achieve much in difficult circumstances.

So sustaining inspiration in ourselves and others is an essential discipline in organizational life. This programme should help us understand better what inspires us and others in this work, and how to make best use of the flow and cycle of inspiration.

The course sequence

We start by describing together the environment (social, cultural, political) in which people are working. We will use three ways to do this:

- An analytic/conceptual approach; trends and patterns, what there is more of, less of and what's stayed the same over the last twenty years.

- Telling stories to illustrate what it's like round here.

- Making models to show a particular aspect of our environment.

We then talk about what or who's inspired us - in our life and our work.

We look at the 'inspiration cycle' - where inspiration comes from, how it leaches away, phases of inspiration-building and inspiration-using, how inspiration gets 'fixed' on an everyday basis, and the symptoms of inspiration-deficiency in ourselves and our organisations.

Then we revisit the idea or purpose which animates or infuses us, and how this has changed over time. We look at how well our methods for planning, evaluating, talking about and learning from our everyday work help to sustain this idea or purpose.

Between the two sessions, we will practise awareness of our patterns of organisational life and how they sustain or drain inspiration.

In session 2, we discuss what we've noticed back at work. We take an inspiration reading for ourselves and the organisation, and map some of the sources and sinks.

We look at the implications for ourselves, and for our interactions with the people who rely on our services.

Then we talk in more depth about what we and our colleagues do and say to sustain inspiration - both as leaders and followers within our teams and in the way we work with people who use our services.

We take part in an 'action learning set' where one participant presents a specific current problem which relates to inspiration, and 'unpacks' the issues with support from the facilitators and colleagues.

Finally, we will imagine some new organisational and personal habits which could sustain inspired working and decide where it would be worth investing effort.

The inspiration cycle

Inspiration is a human resource, and like other resources it can be renewed or depleted. Like air or water, it flows between people - and this flow can be blocked or freed up.

Like other biological and social processes it works in cycles, with highs and lows. There may be periods of inspiration-building and periods of inspiration-exploiting. There are processes which 'fix' inspiration from the environment and processes where inspiration drains away without being used productively.

The nitrogen cycle - which was the basis for agricultural rotations in Europe for centuries and still governs organic agriculture - offers an interesting analogy (though like all analogies breaks down if driven too far).

All plants need nitrogen to grow, and when too little nitrogen is available plants become yellow and stunted. Too much nitrogen at one time can be a problem too, as plants can develop too much leaf and not enough fruit: some also become more vulnerable to disease.

Our air is mostly made up of nitrogen: the challenge is to get nitrogen to plants in a form they can use. There is a bank of nitrogen in the soil which can become depleted if crops are harvested and taken away and nothing is returned to the soil.

Soil nitrogen is renewed in four main ways.

- Natural deposits - the rain provides a small amount of nitrogen (less in Scotland than further south) and a small amount also comes from wild bird droppings.

- Animal manures, composts etc. - where plant or animal matter containing nitrogen is put back on the soil.

- Factory-produced fertiliser - which uses an industrial process and considerable energy to fix nitrogen from the atmosphere.

- Bacteria and algae which are able to fix nitrogen from the atmosphere (much more efficiently than our factories). The most important bacterium for this purpose in Scotland is rhizobium, which lives on the roots of clover, beans and other legumes.

The soil itself is an amazingly complicated environment, and soil conditions have a great influence on how well plants can use the nitrogen which is there. If the soil is very cold, or compacted from being driven over too often, or water-logged, then nitrogen does not become available. In these conditions, it can often be washed off the surface or through the soil into the groundwater, where it is a serious pollutant.

Organic rotations rely on periods of fertility-building and fertility-using. So, for example, a rotation might include two years of clover before a crop such as wheat or potatoes which needs high fertility. Later in the rotation, crops are used which need less nitrogen, before going back to clover or beans to start building fertility again. The period between crops is also important - so for example a nitrogen-fixing crop can be used over the winter as a 'green manure' to restore fertility for the next crop. Having the ground covered over the winter is important for reducing soil erosion by the wind and for preserving residual soil fertility which could otherwise be washed away by the rain.

Nitrogen can also be lost by too much cultivation. Every time a field is ploughed, some of the nitrogen is converted into ammonia and simply blows away. Managing the nitrogen 'budget' is always a question of balance.

Notes on some inspiration sinks and traps

Inspiration is an 'open system' and always in flux. It flows through us and we must continuously draw inspiration in to our work and our organisations. In the second part of this programme we will be looking at ways to renew and 'fix' inspiration.

However, it is also important to understand how inspiration can leach or drain from the system, or become 'tied up' and not available for us to use. We are often aware of losing inspiration and may explain this as tiredness, or demoralisation, or the negativity of colleagues or lack or appreciation by managers. All of these are good enough explanations - but sometimes there are underlying organisational conditions which create tiredness, demoralisation and negativity.

The following notes describe some of these 'systemic' inspiration traps and sinks. As they are 'designed in' to the systems we work in, they are hard but not impossible to change. But the first step to changing them is to recognise them, and that recognition itself - "no wonder I'm feeling tired" - can go some way to restoring inspiration.

1. Defensive routines

(This note draws heavily on 'Overcoming Organisational Defenses' by Argyris)

People in organisations choose to behave in ways which produce unintended consequences. Argyris explains this as a result of 'Model 1' strategies and values which we learn early on and use without thinking in our organisational lives.

Model 1 is 'be effective, be in unilateral control and win - and at the same time don't upset people'. Of course, this contains a contradiction, since for me to be in unilateral control you have to be ineffective.

However, Model 1 is socially acceptable, and implicitly informs everyday practice in organisations as well as countless management textbooks. Part of what makes it socially acceptable is the emphasis on not upsetting people, on saving face. We have strong social expectations about how

people should behave in situations that are potentially embarrassing or threatening. These 'social virtues' as Argyris describes them are: caring, help and support; respect for others; honesty; strength and integrity.

The 'rules of behaviour' which these virtues imply are:

- Give approval and praise to others and tell them what you *believe* will make them feel good about themselves.
- Defer to other people and do not confront their reasoning or actions.
- Tell other people no lies or tell them all you think and feel.
- Advocate your position, and hold your own position in the face of other people's advocating their own.
- Stick to your principles, values and beliefs.

All these 'social virtues' are held in high regard - but when we follow the rules of behaviour which they imply we often create tangles which we are aware of but don't know how to resolve. For example, we try hard to get what we want by saying how much we value the other person and their opinions, but when that doesn't work we resort to 'strength and integrity'.

While we are trying to be gentle with someone and not saying exactly what we mean, the other person often senses this - consciously or unconsciously - and feels uncomfortable. But it can become impossible to discuss the fact that both of us are not actually saying what we think, and it's also undiscussable that we can't discuss this.

At the same time, we may complain to others about the person's behaviour or performance while not taking any share of responsibility for producing the behaviour or performance we find difficult.

These patterns persist indefinitely because they are uncomfortable but tolerable and familiar - and because we are fearful of changing the pattern and don't know how to do this in a manageable way. The result is not disaster, but mediocre performance. People and organisations achieve much less than they could. We have the same ritualistic conversations because they feel safer than doing anything else.

These defensive routines are also common when people are working together across organisational boundaries. Without the 'container' of official line management arrangements, there is even greater scope for

ambiguity, threat or embarrassment.

Argyris goes on to describe a 'Model II' way of working, oriented towards enquiry and learning. In Model II, people advocate their views forthrightly and give evidence for those views while at the same time encouraging enquiry into those views and examination of the evidence on which they are based. In Model II people act less on inference (I know what you think, so I'll say...) and more by stating their own thoughts directly and encouraging other people to state theirs. The problem being, of course, that in Model II people sound like automated call centre systems and in Model I they sound like human beings.

Collaborative inertia
(This note draws on 'Creating Collaborative Advantage' by Chris Huxham)

'Joint working' has become a political requirement over the last twenty years or so, and it is widely agreed that many social problems are too diffuse or complex for any single agency to tackle. Sometimes the remedy proposed is for agencies to merge into larger entities, but even these larger entities need to work with other agencies - and in any case often recreate internal boundaries for people to defend.

Joint working is not simply about statutory agencies working together. It typically means including voluntary organisations and community and/or service user representatives in both development and implementation of policy.

The goals of collaborative working are usually about process as well as outcome - not just getting more done, but about building better working relationships and strengthening capacity for future efforts. Chris Huxham defines 'collaborative advantage' in these terms:

"Collaborative advantage will be achieved when something unusually creative is produced - perhaps an objective is met - that no organisation could have produced on its own and when each organisation, through the collaboration, is able to achieve its own objectives better than it could alone. In some cases, it should also be possible to achieve some higher-level...objectives for society as a whole rather than just for the participating organisations."

This is a high expectation, but necessary to justify the investment of time, money and credibility required to achieve collaborative advantage.

Unless collaboration holds out the possibility of achieving something worthwhile which cannot be achieved in any other way, then - other things being equal - individuals or organisations will either not embark on or not sustain the complex process of joint working.

Ideally, free and independent agencies make a decision to invest in collaborative working in order to tackle otherwise intractable problems together because tackling these problems is important enough for them to forego some autonomy and resources by joining with others in a common - and probably long-term - endeavour.

However, other things are not equal. Government often expects or mandates agencies to work together, and access to funds may be contingent on producing joint documents and plans. Once a collaborative structure is in place, it is difficult for a voluntary or community organisation to refuse an invitation to join, even if they have misgivings about the value of the process in achieving their own organisation's goals. These collaborative structures - whether joint working groups, partnership boards, alliances, or forums - can hardly be a meeting of free and equal bodies given the huge disparities in size and power, and the fact that some agencies round the table are dependent on other agencies' funding for their continued existence.

These 'political' considerations can provide an uncomfortable basis for collaboration. But even without these, the difficulties of collaborative working are considerable. They include:

Definition of goals

Collaborative structures in a public service environment struggle to define clear shared goals, for all sorts of reasons.

High-level goals such as reducing poverty, promoting social inclusion or welcoming diversity are hard to address as a whole - but if they are broken down too far the specific measures and targets to be achieved often end up 'belonging' to one specific agency, and it is then hard to see how the collaboration itself can contribute.

One response to this challenge is the 'flight to paper'. Collaboratives redefine their goals in terms of producing a written strategy document. This strategy document typically consists mostly of recommendations to the 'owners' of the collaboration and hands back the difficult decisions about priorities, resources and change.

Some goals would mean a shift of power or resources away from one group or agency, either to another member of the collaborative or to a third party. Collaboratives can provide friendly support but by definition cannot coerce a member agency to change - and are usually not in a position to offer a trade or inducement for change.

Seeking to define collaborative goals too closely - especially at the start - may make progress impossible. A creative fudge of general direction and statements of intent at least keeps people round the table long enough for useful work to be found. However, some individuals and agencies find it hard to live with indeterminate goals and either press for 'practical action' or withdraw from the 'talking shop'.

The time it takes

Working together takes so much longer, both in terms of time spent on the work and in terms of 'lapsed' time. The time consumed in setting up and recording the meetings, having the discussions, keeping the communications going, negotiating disagreements and misunderstandings, circulating and commenting on drafts, securing consents and repeating the discussions usually feels disproportionate to the progress made and opportunities lost. The lags introduced by people having to go back and check things out with their constituencies, and the delays created when people miss meetings, or send a different representative, stretch out the timescales for getting things done.

These two factors reinforce each other. Because it's so time-consuming, people miss meetings or send other people who hold things up because they have to catch up: and because the process stretches over months and years members of the original cast leave their jobs, move house or simply move on.

Who's here?

While collaborative structures are usually described as partnerships between agencies, they operate in practice through individuals meeting and working together.

Those individuals often have a tenuous or unclear mandate from the organisation they ostensibly represent. There may be two or three people from different divisions or professions within a health board, or a local authority - and when these people have different views or priorities it is hard to know which if any of them is representing the agency.

Representatives of voluntary organisations are expected in some way to represent the 'sector' rather than their own agency, and may even be nominated through some sort of democratic structure. But in practice, it is unusual for a representative to be able to negotiate a brief which is detailed enough to cover every emerging issue and flexible enough to allow progress.

Representatives of community groups or service users also face questions of legitimacy and authority. Can they speak for the majority of community members who are not members of their community group? Is their personal experience and expertise relevant, or are they only allowed to talk about other people's experiences? Are they less representative and less credible if they become expert in the workings of the system?

By definition, a collaboration is not simply a win-lose situation where every agency is advocating its own interests. So all representatives experience a tension between accountability and loyalty to the collaborative and accountability and loyalty to the organisation they represent.

Questions of authority and legitimacy are never far from the surface. Community and service user representatives may claim greater weight for their views because they live with the issue every day. Clinicians may claim greater weight for their views because of their qualifications and experience and everyday involvement. Community groups may feel shortchanged if a statutory agency is not represented by a very senior officer, even if that officer would have no time to follow through on tasks agreed in the group. Often, these challenges to legitimacy are presented obliquely or in code, making them harder to discuss openly.

Finally, the pressures of organisational life mean that busy staff end up missing meetings, arriving late or leaving early. The pressures of personal life can also make it hard for some unpaid members of service user groups to attend consistently, and this then tends to leave all the work to a few people who are then dubbed 'the usual suspects'.

The quality of dialogue

The quality of conversation in collaboratives is often poor. Running a collaborative meeting productively and inclusively requires more planning and attention than running an in-house meeting, but often gets less - partly because the outcomes of the collaborative meeting are less likely

to have an immediate and noticeable impact.

Chairing a collaborative is a complex role. Often the 'lead agency' holds the chair - and this ambivalence between representing the lead agency and representing the collaborative has to be negotiated with a high level of skill and awareness.

There are difficulties not just of vocabulary but also of interpretation. People unconsciously or deliberately use technical terms which others don't understand, and an explicit rule may be needed to discourage this. However, differences of interpretation may go unnoticed because everyone understands the words - but they understand them differently. As a simple example, 'the community' to some people means a geographical location while to others it simply means 'not operationally part of the hospital service'.

Members of the group represent agencies of unequal size and power, and the members themselves vary greatly in skill, experience, confidence and status. With fifteen or twenty people round the table and limited time, managing an authentic discussion is tricky.

People come to collaboratives because of a shared interest in the work to be done. It can be hard to balance this attention to 'task' with attention to 'process'. Healthy collaboratives spend a part of their time talking about how they are working, not just what they are doing - but it is not easy to make the time for this potentially uncomfortable discussion.

These - along with external factors - contribute to what Huxham calls 'collaborative inertia'. Inertia does not mean that nothing happens - but that whatever was happening before keeps going in a straight line - a bit like the Tempel comet recently hit by NASA.

Mixed messages

We experience a mixed message when a boss or colleague tells us to do two incompatible things at once, or when the content of what they are saying is not matched by their actions or tone. For example:

"Come to the team meeting if you have time" or "You need to look after yourself and take some time off. How are you getting on with that report?"

leave us feeling uncomfortable and confused. We don't know what the other person means, but they've put us in a position where it's hard to ask them what they mean.

Mixed messages are profoundly disempowering and destroy inspiration because there is no right (even if difficult) response to them. Whatever we do leaves us feeling bad. Over time, they destroy trust and evoke cynicism.

Government is a constant source of mixed messages. For example, agencies are supposed to engage and consult communities about priorities, but at the same time, the priorities have been scripted in advance by government. Ministers will emphasise that policy 'x' is a non-negotiable priority, while judging the performance of agencies and directors on indicators y and z.

If we respond by becoming cynical or apathetic, we collude in this pattern of mixed messages - and we destroy our own inspiration. If we challenge the mixed message, the response is usually along the lines of 'it goes with the territory' or 'that's why you're paid to manage'.

Fragmentation

Most managers in human service organisations spend their time juggling several different tasks and sets of responsibilities. Juggling is a worrying analogy: it's totally absorbing for the person doing it, sometimes entertaining and often irritating for the people watching it; and if done successfully moves everything round in a circle and back to the beginning.

Most of our organisations glorify busyness, value overwork, encourage multitasking and praise speed. This is not because there is so much to be done: our organisations value these things for their own sake. It is hard to resist this social pressure, and busyness has its advantages. We would have done a better job if we had been given more time; and we can take comfort in our heroic inputs and outputs rather than recognise our limited contribution to outcomes.

This fragmentation isn't just unhealthy, tiring, frustrating and unproductive. It also destroys our inspiration because we never have enough time to attend deeply to the idea or purpose, and so to renew our understanding and appreciation. Just as importantly, it destroys other people's inspiration, because we never have enough time and space to give them high-quality attention, whether in a meeting or one to one.

Nancy Kline comments that 'the quality of a person's attention determines the quality of other people's thinking' (Kline, 1999). The idea or purpose

which inspires us has to be a living thing, not a formula - and what keeps it alive is thinking for ourselves about it. If we don't do that thinking for ourselves, and create the attention-space where others can do this with us, then we are soon left with the shell of an idea but nothing inside.

Loss of feedback

Some of the creative work we do results in a product which we can see or hear or taste or feel - we plant a crop or build a wall or clean the floor or cook a meal. Memory of the result of our work stores inspiration for the future.

Some of the creative work we do generates appreciation - people like the painting, people thank us for the party, people applaud our singing. Some generates financial rewards or public recognition.

Much of the creative work we do in human services has results which are harder to discern. Mostly it's not like being the fireman who saves someone's life or the surgical team who perform heart bypass surgery. It's not even like being the teacher whose pupils do well in their exams.

"Within human service organisations, however, this (focus on outcomes) is particularly challenging because of the difficulty in identifying program outcomes and because of the even more formidable task of collecting data to evaluate the outcomes."
(Proehl, 2001)

When we do define concrete outcomes - e.g. proportion of people over 85 supported at home rather than an institution - we risk establishing perverse incentives to work to the outcome measure rather than to underlying values such as service and self-determination. We still struggle to measure what 'successfully' supported at home might mean, or to define an optimum level of people being supported at home. And even where we see a change in outcomes, we may be hard-pressed to claim that any particular actions we took had a causal link to the outcomes.

So we are at risk of not knowing if and how our work is making a difference - and this risk is more acute the more that our work involves managing others.

Some very practical steps to unblock this inspiration trap are: to think about the sort of intermediate outcomes which might at least suggest

that something is heading in the right direction; to spend time with people who would be likely to notice or remark on such straws in the wind; and most importantly to act as a 'noticing service' for colleagues.

Dependence

We spend much if not most of our waking hours living in an organisation. We invest great emotional significance in organisations. Gareth Morgan writes:

"This perspective suggests that we can understand organisations and much of the behaviour within organisations in terms of a quest for immortality. In creating organisations we create structures of activity that are larger than life and that often survive for generations. In becoming identified with such organisations we ourselves find meaning and permanence..."

We expect a great deal of our organisations, and particularly of the boss. We want them to show leadership, but not to be authoritarian. We want praise and support and affirmation and for them to make it OK; and we want to be left alone and given responsibility and be treated as an adult. This is all perfectly understandable, just endlessly disappointing.

In 'mission-based' organisations, there is a clear tension between authority and power. Peter Senge (1999) writes

"It (having a mission-based organisation) is so profoundly radical. It says, in essence, that those in positions of authority are not the source of authority. It says, rather, that the source of legitimate power in the organisation is its guiding ideas."

Christine Anderson says, more succinctly 'the goal is the boss'. In practice, though, there are (at least) two bosses: the guiding ideas or purpose and the real feet of clay person in the office along the corridor.

For all the talk of flat hierarchies and empowerment, our human service organisations tend to be traditional and status-conscious 'Apollo' organisations, with pyramid-shaped organisational charts used to represent work relationships. Responsibility and authority tends to get pulled upwards and to the centre, and there are high expectations on managers to organise and supervise the work of their staff.

In this context, it is easy to feel dependent on one's own manager and on 'management' generally not just for enabling useful work but for providing inspiration. This is irrational, because it means that all inspiration should flow down and out from one person at the top. The reality is that however much inspiration there is at the centre (and sometimes there's not much to spare), inspiration also has to flow in and up from the edges.

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