

# **Intelligent Local Governance: a developing agenda**

**by Les Worrall**

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the issues which surround making local government more intelligent. In particular, the focus of the paper is to examine how better research and more effective knowledge management can assist this process. Local government is a particularly fertile area for analysis given the large scale managerial and structural changes being occasioned within it and a developing central government agenda to reinvent local democracy.

The paper argues that developments are needed in several areas. The need for more effective information management, the need for better frameworks for assessing performance, the need to develop the "strategic capacity" of local authorities, and, perhaps most importantly, the need to create an environment in which intelligent local governance can develop and flourish.

## The author

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# Intelligent Local Governance: a developing agenda

## 1. Introduction

In a recent paper <sup>1</sup>, Tim Blackman used the phrase “intelligent local governance” as a conceptual framework with which to examine how local government interacts with its environment. Essentially, he argued that a local authority’s capacity to conduct research, manage information and embed the outcomes of its research and information management activity into its “strategic consciousness” will determine how effective that local authority will be and what impact it will make in addressing local “wicked issues”.

Indeed, over the last few years, the concepts of the “learning organisation”, “knowledge management” have become particularly prevalent in the academic literature <sup>2 3</sup>, the practitioner oriented literature (see recent editions of Long Range Planning) and on the “very expensive conference circuit”. Though, given our ability to be suckered by fads, it is somewhat worrying that knowledge management has been labelled “as a young discipline that is defined by its aspirations, not by its methods”<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the issues which surround making local government (or local governance?) more intelligent and to examine the role of research and knowledge management in that process. I will try to be provocative.

## 2. The domain – local government

Local government is a particularly interesting area in which to conduct research. Current debates about democratic renewal, best value, joined-up government and regionalism are all interesting areas in themselves and particularly in their impact on current power structures. The growth in the number of citizens’ panels and juries is no doubt being seen by many ward members as something that will undermine their representative power and role. In many cases, the way that the outcomes of these consultative exercises will influence policy and practice has not been thought through particularly when the vox populi does not overlap with the mantra of the prevailing political group. What price the manifesto now?

Emerging splits between executive, cabinet members and (back bench, marginalised?) scrutineers will radically change the traditional model of governance and leave the whips with little to do. The thought of some characters becoming elected mayors is little short of frightening. However, the real concerns from a research perspective are: how will these new forms of governance be supported by research and how will the changed power relationships affect the forms of research support that are needed?

## 3. Making local government more intelligent

While it is all too easy to focus exclusively on the above issues, it is my view that the common theme that should underpin local government reform – making local government and governance more intelligent – is something to which insufficient attention is being paid and is an issue which is rarely discussed. Indeed, later on, I will argue that the huge amount of change affecting local government

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<sup>1</sup> Blackman, T. & Coombes, M. (1996) Using administrative data for intelligent local governance *Journal of Applied Management Studies* 5(2) pp. 179-198.

<sup>2</sup> Moingeon, B. & Edmondson, A. (1996) *Organizational learning and competitive advantage* London: Sage.

<sup>3</sup> Nonaka, I. & Takeuchi, H. (1995) *The knowledge creating company* Oxford: Open University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Hamscher, W. (1999) From Data to Information: strategy process and technology *Financial Times Mastering Management Review* (21) pp. 20-23.

now – and the litany of legislation that has affected it since the 1970s – may actually be creating an environment which is making the task of improving organisational knowledge management and the creation of learning organisations far more difficult in the public sector in general and in local government in particular.

There are a number of issues and themes I wish to explore in this paper:

- First, Blackman (1996) sees making local government more intelligent largely in the guise of an information management problem – basically, if local government managed its information better it would become more intelligent. While I see this as a necessary condition, I do not see it as a sufficient condition.
- Second, the creation of intelligent local governance will depend more on how well high quality research is embedded into the strategic management processes of a local authority. The key question here is: how can knowledge production processes be more effectively embedded within the strategic process in local authorities? In many cases, both the nature of the knowledge production and strategic processes are somewhat opaque and the quality of research being conducted in local authorities (and other public sector and quasi-public sector organisations for that matter) is relatively poor and often does not go beyond uncritical data collection with a few frequency counts and cross-tabulations being considered sufficient output. Indeed, the 1995 LARIA report into research in UK local authorities<sup>5</sup> gives some support for this assertion.
- Third, the strategic management maturity of many local authorities is not great and while many local authorities posture nobly as “strategic authorities” with their highly paid strategic directors, a critical analysis of what they actually do usually does not equate too well with what they say they do (this is particularly evident when needs-based strategies meet the budget quagmire). We need better process responses to the “strategy problem” and not tokenist structural responses.
- Fourth, there is a burgeoning literature on the new public management (NPM) and its many variants. Of particular interest here is the clash between professionalism and managerialism<sup>6</sup>. Local authorities have become massively managerial with their performance management systems where everything is measured. While accountability has been decentralised, control has been increasingly centralised and organisational power is exerted through performance related pay, the threat of the loss of contracts and other overt and covert control mechanisms. Increasingly management in local government has been seen as control rather than as a means of fostering creativity. Whether this creates an organisational environment which makes local authorities more amenable to becoming “intelligent” is a question not often asked. I think it might not.

#### 4. The need for better information management

Being able to make sense of data and information is a central element in the process of becoming “more intelligent”. Many of the text books argue that from data we extract information and from information we derive knowledge. My view is somewhat different in that I argue that you need knowledge to be able to derive information from data (i.e. to make sense of data).

Unfortunately, we “techies” are too quick off the block to go out and collect data rather than thinking through the conceptual and analytical frameworks in which data is given meaning. Consequently, making sense of the data collected is often a very difficult task resulting in the production of bland shelf-ware and poor policy.

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<sup>5</sup> Boddy, M. & Snape, D. (1995) *The role of research in local government* Wokingham: LARIA.

<sup>6</sup> Ferlie, E., Ashburner, L., Fitzgerald, L. & Pettigrew, A. (1996) *The new public management in action* Oxford: Open University Press.

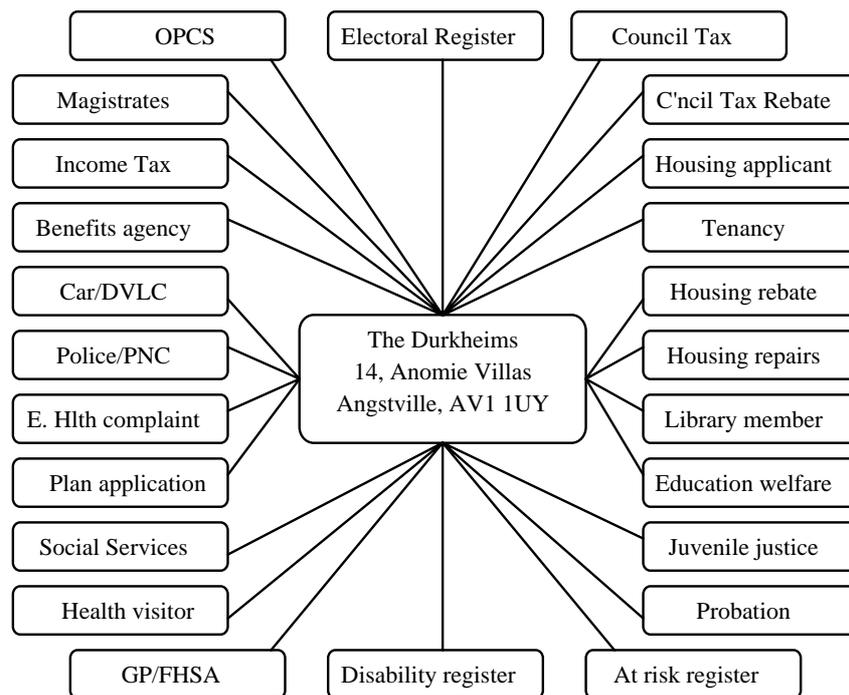
One of my main concerns about the construction of organisational intranets and information warehouses, is that these are often huge dustbins full of meaningless dross of dubious provenance. You cannot construct organisational knowledge out of meaningless dross but it is amazing how people many try. As they say, “nice web site, shame about the content”.

Within local government (and the agencies that are now linked in formal partnerships with it) there is a morass of data which has been derived from administrative systems, censuses, surveys and ad hoc research exercises. Unfortunately, “wicked issues” always spawn “wicked data” – that is data which is difficult to link together often because it is based on non-overlapping geographies or different entity definitions.

While there have been huge developments in the effective use of information at the operational and tactical levels through, for example, the use of GIS, it has been argued that GIS has failed to make a significant impact at the policy level in public sector organisations<sup>7</sup> despite significant potential for it to make such an impact<sup>8</sup>.

The kind of information architectures need to support “joined-up” government are conceptually simple but massively difficult to bring about in practice due to technical – but mainly political – reasons. One such possible architecture is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. So who are you and where do you live?



While architectures such as that in Figure 1 can be built, there remain significant unanswered questions about the political and social desirability of building these systems. There remain even more questions about how these systems would be used to support policy formation locally and to support intelligent local governance. Perhaps intelligent local government built on these foundations might prove politically unacceptable? Society might not want a digital panopticon<sup>9</sup> - which again,

<sup>7</sup> Worrall, L. & Bond, D. (1997) GIS, Spatial Analysis and Public Policy: the British experience *International Statistical Review* 26(3) pp. 152-173.

<sup>8</sup> Worrall, L. (1995) The role of GIS-based spatial analysis in strategic management in local government *Computers, Environment and Urban Systems* 32(2) pp.107-119.

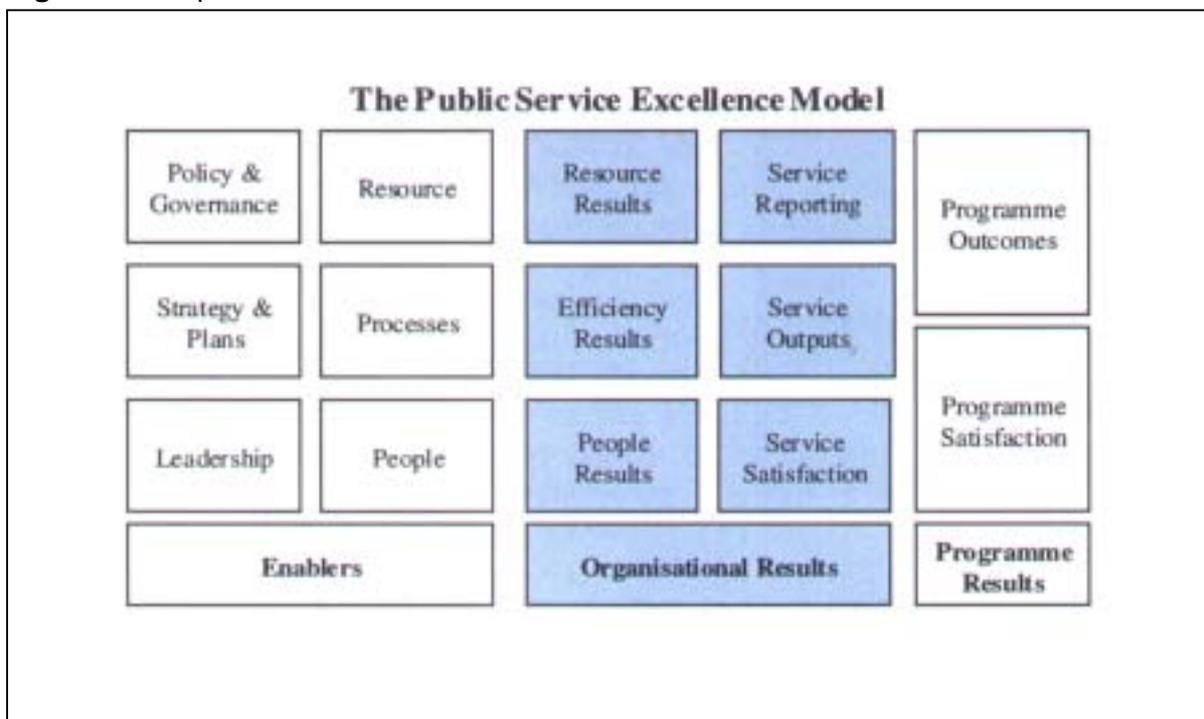
<sup>9</sup> Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison* London: Penguin.

poses unresolved questions about the design of information systems to support more dynamic and responsive – but, perhaps, more socially intrusive - forms of local governance.

In the recent past various frameworks have been suggested to help managers structure the strategic management problems they face. These have included the balanced business scorecard (BBS), the business excellence model and the public sector excellence model. However, while these models do give managers a holistic framework in which to structure their information requirements (and with the BBS an explicit requirement to develop causal models and linkages) they also have massive information management implications.

Based on recent consultancy experience, much of the data needed to support these systems do not exist and many managers find it difficult to articulate their information requirements (and even more to build causal understandings of their areas). Where these approaches have been implemented many of the existing management indicators previously in use – and on which past managerial decisions have been based - are shown to be somewhat deficient.

**Figure 2.** The public sector excellence model



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I have argued that better information management is a pre-requisite for more intelligent local governance but I have also argued that it is insufficient of itself. Clearly, there is a need to improve managerial competencies in the field of strategic thinking and IT-based information management as in all too many cases, good information systems are designed by technologists only to be badly used or ignored by managers.

It is rewarding to note in a recent study carried out among 5,000 UK managers <sup>10</sup> that strategic thinking, using IT and information management were the three skills that managers most perceive that they will need to improve on in the next five years.

<sup>10</sup> Worrall, L. & Cooper, C. L. (1998) The Quality of Working Life: 1998 report London: Institute of Management.

## 5. The need for better research

There is a huge difference between social research and social accounting and yet most of what passes as research in local government is certainly more akin to social accounting than to research. In this, I am just as guilty as the next person. The quality of research is particularly bad in the field of evaluation research. Again, apart from members of LARIA, there are few officers and members in local authority with adequate research skills in two fundamental areas: in their ability to commission research and in their ability to evaluate and then respond to commissioned research.

There is also too much research that is “methodologically challenged” – which reminds me of a story which would be funny if it wasn’t so accurate.

*One day a philosopher was out walking with a mathematician, a statistician and an MBA. She saw the spire of a church in the distance and said to them “I want you to find out the height of that spire and then to tell me how you know how high the spire is”. She came back later and asked the mathematician. “About 125 feet 6 inches”, said the mathematician (it's pre-metric because it's an old story). “Good”, said the philosopher, “but how do you know that?”. “I used trigonometry and scale drawings” said the mathematician. She turned to the statistician and asked him. “I am 95% certain that the steeple is 125 feet 4 inches plus or minus 3½ inches” said the statistician. “And how do you know that” said the philosopher. “I used the same methods as the mathematician but I repeated the exercise 50 times as I was concerned about measurement error”. “Wonderful”, said the philosopher. She turned to the MBA and asked him. “It's exactly 125 feet 3 inches” he replied. “Incredible” said the philosopher. “And what methodology did you use?” “What’s methodology”, said the MBA, “I met the vicar in the pub and said I would bung him a tenner if he told me”.*

As a consultant, some of the briefs I have been given have been very badly thought out (in other cases not) and some of the expectations about how much policy analysis you can squeeze out of a few badly crafted questions completely unrealistic. One of the downsides of recent change in local government is that research has become to be seen less as a core competence and more as a function that can be outsourced to consultants. Once the cheque has arrived, consultants are not particularly bothered about whether their research is acted on or not.

My argument here is that in a learning organisation, research skills are a core competence of all managers and not just of research staff. In local government, there are now too few reflective practitioners and too many target setters and chasers. Becoming a learning organisation has major implications for the design of management development programmes – this is something we really have not yet got right. Organisations like LARIA should be more vocal in making sure that education and training providers do get this right.

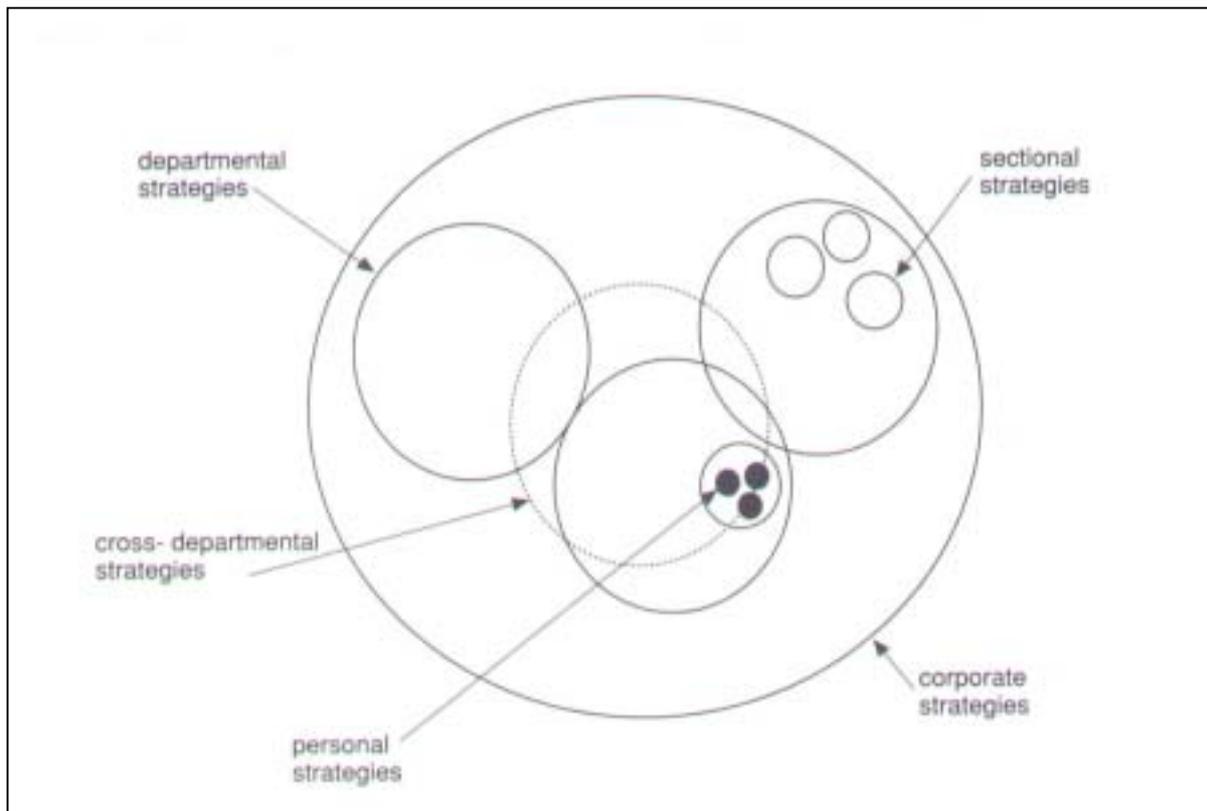
## 6. The need to enhance the strategic capacity of local authorities

The strategic process is massively complicated in many local authorities due to the inherent complexity of local authorities as organisations. One thing local authorities are not short of is strategies. In earlier research<sup>11</sup>, the notion of local authority strategy as “spheres within spheres” was developed to try to explain the complexity and the concept of “soft strategy” was developed to try to move the way people think about strategy from “strategy as design” to “strategy as process”.

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<sup>11</sup> Worrall, L., Collinge, C. & Bill, A. (1999) Managing strategy in local government *International Journal of Public Sector Management* 11(6) pp. 472-493.

Figure 3. Spheres within spheres



Source: Worrall, Collinge and Bill (1999)

Reconciling the relative weight of each of these spheres often proves difficult particularly where departmental interests do not nest neatly within corporate priorities – and they rarely do. In conducting the research on which our paper was based one local authority chief executive in a very large metropolitan local authority was candid enough to remark that enacting strategic change in their organisation was impossible because the relationship between directors and their respective chairs was “just too strong” and, in particular, strong enough to ensure that departmental interests would always outweighed corporate interests.

Our research has shown that the point at which strategic intentions confront the budget is critical<sup>12</sup> as evidenced by a quote from Colin Talbot in a personal communication recounting some research he was doing in local government.

*"As one local authority chief officer said to me, we spend nine months of the year talking about grand strategic and policy initiatives and then when budget time comes around it all gets forgotten for three months while we fight for the money."*

*Prof. Colin Talbot*

The interface between strategising and budgeting is critical in a learning organisation as it here where good intentions are backed by resources and commitments to action – consequently, it is so disconcerting to see just how many local authorities are still locked into the practice of incremental budgeting thus negating the developments that are being made upstream in the strategic process.

<sup>12</sup> Worrall, L. & Bill, A. C. (1997) *Some thoughts on priority based budgeting in local government* Working paper WP009/97 Wolverhampton Business School.

There are, however, some notable exceptions to the rule of incrementalist budgeting particularly those organisations that are using tools such as Decision Conferencing to link policy making to budgeting.

## 7. The need for an organisational environment in which intelligent management can flourish

Over the last twenty years, local government has had inflicted upon it a massive dose of rampant managerialism and, unfortunately, reading the runes it looks as though there is a lot more in the pipeline. In the health sector, writers like Ewan Ferlie<sup>13</sup> have commented on the new breed of “macho purchasing” managers that has sprung up and growing conflicts between professionals and managers. Others have commented on the rise in popularity of performance management systems and have even celebrated the arrival of the “business performance revolution”<sup>14</sup> (whatever that might be given the hyperbole that surrounds much modern management sophistry).

My own views of management are that *management should be seen as an overhead to be minimised* and that there is much more to be gained from *embedding management into existing processes* – though I concede that this is difficult to achieve. These views of management contrast sharply with present approaches which have largely sought to implement “better management” in the public sector by the construction of more bureaucracy which by its very nature “looks in on” existing processes and is therefore somewhat detached from them. This effectively creates an “us and them” mindset rather than a “we” mindset when attention turns to implementation.

While quality management in the private sector has tended to be implemented by embedding quality into business processes (particularly through the supply chain), there is still the ethos of the “man in the white coat with a clipboard” in the way that quality is thought to be managed in the public sector.

I was made aware recently of an OFSTED inspection of a school where the OFSTED inspectors were themselves being inspected. In this instance, there were inspectors inspecting the inspectors who were inspecting the teaching. Both sets of inspectors had been “parachuted into” an environment with which they would have no long term attachment and where their mental maps and impressions could not be anything other than superficial. QED?

However, talking about measuring business performance is a lot easier than doing it and there are some well known stories about how performance management systems can become an end in themselves, how they can assume an existence of their own with massively distorting consequences and how they can often set colleague against colleague.

How much time has been wasted by public sector managers attempting to achieve the wrong targets (e.g. recruitment into universities at the expense of driving forward academic quality) and how many resources have been wasted when the political whim radically changes direction (e.g. panic reactions to drive down hospital waiting lists)? Isn't the setting of wrong targets an outcome of a lack of intelligent management and governance? Wouldn't it be better if we tried to become intelligent before we tried to become efficient?

One of the best management thinkers (and I stress the importance of the word “thinker”), W. Edwards Deming<sup>15</sup> is scathing about the impact of performance evaluation on managers and management and equally disparaging on managing a company by relying on “visible factors” alone – management by numbers certainly has its dangers particularly if the numbers are the wrong numbers or if the

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<sup>13</sup> Ferlie, A. & Pettigrew, A. (1996) Managing Through Networks: some issues and implications for the NHS *British Journal of Management* 7 pp. 81-99.

<sup>14</sup> Neely, A. (1999) *Measuring Business Performance: why, what and how* London: Economist Books.

<sup>15</sup> Walton, M. (1986) *The Deming management method* New, York: Pedigree Books.

performance management systems is “socially incomplete”<sup>16</sup>. There is also ample evidence to suggest that when an indicator gets selected as an indicator to support management that the indicator immediately gets distorted. If this is the case then behavioural responses and “good old human nature” may invalidate approaches based on management by numbers. An illustration may help.

*One day, the Sheriff of Nottingham was walking in the forest and came across a clearing. Around the edge of the clearing was a circle of trees, each of which had a target painted on it. Smack in the middle of each target was an arrow. A young boy was standing in the middle of the clearing. "Did you shoot the arrows?", said the Sheriff. "Yes", said the boy. "You are a wonderful marksman", said the Sheriff, "but tell me how you do it?". "Its easy", said the boy, "I fire the arrows at the trees and then paint the targets around them".*

Despite, the somewhat trivial story, there is an important point here. If we are to create learning organisations and intelligent local authorities, what kind of managerial environment do we have to create? I don't know - but what I do know is that it isn't the one that we have at the moment. The key question should be: is the present local government environment amenable to experimentation and creativity? Current research being carried out at UMIST would indicate not. In a recent article in the Guardian<sup>17</sup>, I reported some of the results of a five year research programme looking at managers' changing experiences of work. That research has revealed that public sector managers are significantly more discontented with their lot than managers in private sector organisations<sup>18</sup>.

This may be related to the fact that in the last two years, the same panel of public sector managers has been exposed to a substantial amount of organisational restructuring. In each of the last two years, around 75% of managers in the public sector have been affected by restructuring compared to 55% in the private sector. In the clear majority of cases in the public sector (65%), these changes have been driven by cost reduction and often accompanied by downsizing.

The table below identifies the impact of change on managers' perceptions of the impact of change on their organisations. There is a strong view in the public sector that the impact of change is to *decrease* the speed of decision making (as people become frightened of sticking their neck out?), to *decrease* managers' sense of participation in the management of their organisation but to sharply *increase* their sense of accountability<sup>19</sup>.

*The most profound effect in the public sector (and the former public utilities) is that managers feel that key skills and organisational knowledge have been lost as a direct result of restructuring. It would appear that restructuring is not necessarily achieving the effects on which it was justified and that this may be seriously undermining the knowledge bases of organisations. Just as change would appear not to be achieving the business benefits which have usually been used to justify change, the impact of change on public sector managers sense of loyalty, motivation, morale and job security has also been profoundly negative. In 1998, 80% of public sector managers reported that the effect change had been to reduce their morale, 63% said that it had reduced their sense of motivation, 60% said that it had reduced their loyalty to their organisation and 76% said that it had decreased their sense of job security<sup>20</sup>. How can managers be creative and experimental under these conditions?<sup>21</sup>*

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<sup>16</sup> Worrall, L. & Cooper, C. L. (1997) *The Quality of Working Life: 1997 survey of managers' experiences* London: Institute of Management.

<sup>17</sup> *The Guardian* (1998) Who in their right mind would be a public sector manager? September 19<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> Worrall, L., Cooper, C. L. & Campbell, F. (forthcoming) *The impact of organizational change on the work experiences and perceptions of public sector managers* Personnel Review.

<sup>19</sup> Worrall, L., Cooper, C. L. & Campbell, F. (1999) False Economy *Financial Times Mastering Management Review* 21 pp. 36-38.

<sup>20</sup> Worrall, L., Cooper, C. L. & Campbell, F. (forthcoming) The impact of organizational change on UK managers' perceptions of their working lives, In: R. Burke & C. L. Cooper (Eds) *The Organization in Crisis* London: Blackwell.

**Table 1.** The effects of organisational change (net agree)

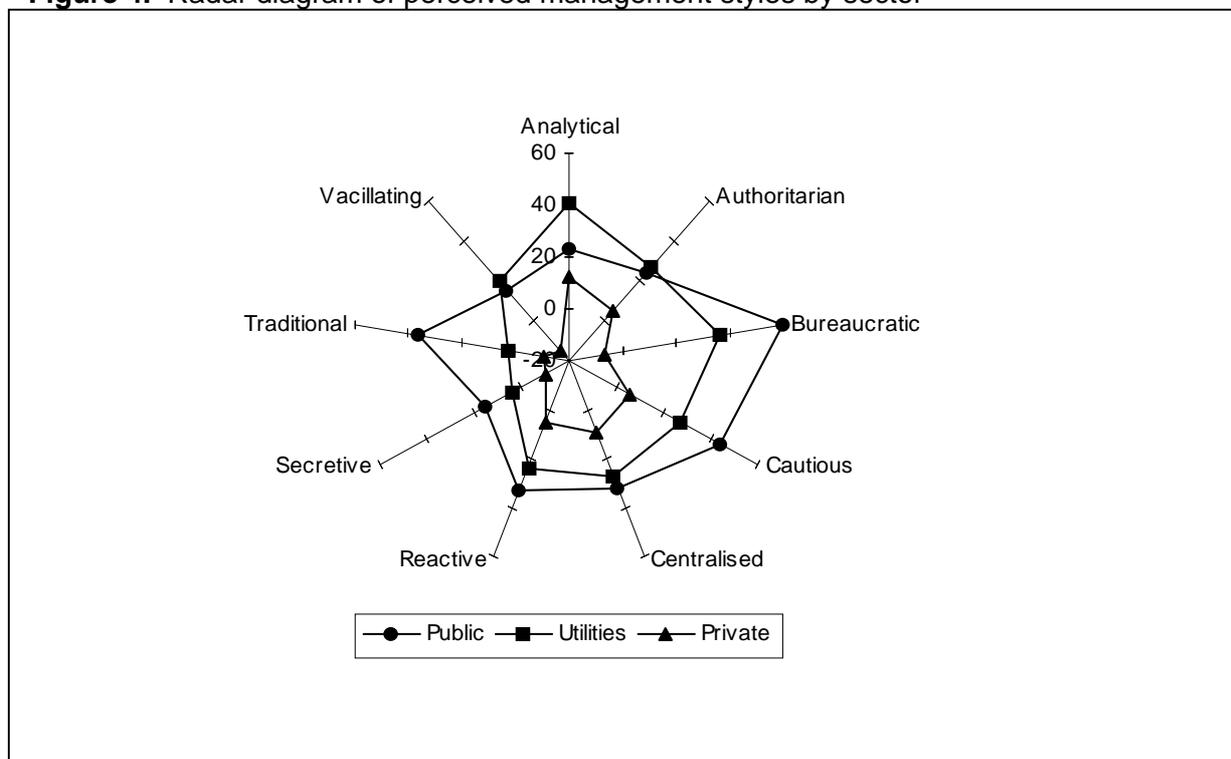
The effects of organisational change	All	Public	Utilities	Private
Accountability has increased	52	47	60	55
Decision making is faster	-1	-13	14	4
Participation has increased	11	-5	8	19
Flexibility has increased	16	6	24	22
Key skills and organisational knowledge have been lost	26	51	70	7

Source: Worrall and Cooper (1998)

A second issue of some concern is whether perceived managerial styles in the public sector are amenable to effective knowledge management and the creation of learning organisations. Our research would indicate not. Managers were asked to assess the managerial styles of their organisations on a set of twelve measurement scales. The results are shown in Figure 4 which reveals substantial differences between public and private sector managers' perceptions of the prevailing managerial styles in their organisation.

Public sector organisations are characterised more by managerial styles which are bureaucratic, cautious, centralised, reactive, secretive and traditional while private sector organisations are seen to be characterised by managerial styles which are more entrepreneurial, risk taking, decentralised, proactive, open and innovative. I would argue that learning organisations cannot be created while managers perceive their organisations to be bureaucratic, cautious, centralised, reactive, secretive and traditional. The question is: how to change them without designing performance management systems which further distort behaviours and without another wholesale reorganisation?

**Figure 4.** Radar diagram of perceived management styles by sector



<sup>21</sup> Worrall, L. & Cooper, C. L. (1998) Change? Don't tell the boss *Financial Times Mastering Management Review* February pp. 17-19.

## 8. Some conclusions

The real purpose of this paper has been to stimulate some debate about how we can improve local government - not by reorganising it yet again - but by thinking through how we can transform local authorities into learning organisations based on creativity, experimentation, solid research, reflective management and effective knowledge management and transform them from organisations riven by poor morale and low motivation. In my view, this is far more important than shuffling the political and senior management deck chairs yet again.

In the paper, I have identified four broad areas in which changes are needed:

- First, there is a need for far *more effective information management* which will be achieved primarily by getting the core information systems in local authorities right. My great worry is that too much effort is going into the design and implementation of corporate web sites and intranets at the expense of resolving some of the core information management problems that face local government. The trick here will be to design systems that are socially and politically acceptable: you cannot have joined up government without joined up data. However, the paper exposes real concerns about the amount of thought that goes into the design of data collection exercises and the construction of conceptual frameworks that will assist in the analysis and interpretation of the data collected. An organisation's ability to implement holistic frameworks such as the business excellence model or the balanced business scorecard will depend on the availability of well structured data and managers' ability to develop causal understanding of their services and, for example, how their services, policies and programmes impact on society and how this can not only be measured *but how it can be learnt from*.
- Second, there is *a need for better crafted research* in local government based on the realisation that social research is qualitatively different from social accounting and data gathering. It would appear that far too many local authorities do not see research as a core organisational competence and that many managers do not see research as a core managerial competence. Too much research is outsourced to consultants and, to be honest, many managers could not commission or identify a good piece of research if they fell over it. You cannot be a learning organisation if you do not have a strong research capability.
- Third, there is *a need to develop the mechanisms to improve how research is embedded into the (often badly defined) strategic management processes* that exist in local government. Even though many organisations claim to be "strategic", a critical evaluation of their strategic management processes often reveals that key links in the chain are broken and that the captain in the bridge is turning a steering wheel that is not connected to the rudder. Perhaps achieving this might be too much to hope for and perhaps we should be doing more to recast strategic management in the guise of political choice theory rather than rational choice theory.
- Fourth, there is *a need to create an organisational and managerial environment in local government that will more effectively support the process of transforming local authorities into learning organisations*. The continual change that local authorities are having imposed upon them now appears to be doing far more harm than good and this lends some weight to the rather cynical definition of a successful central government policy as "an intervention that does not have completely the opposite effect to that intended". The fact that parts of local government is having performance related pay imposed upon it when it has been largely discarded as ineffective and as a something that distorts behaviour by the private sector defies belief. Our research has shown that the reorganisations that have been imposed on local government - from without and from within - have been perceived by managers to have the effect of stripping out the organisation's knowledge and skills bases, of reducing the speed of decision making, of reducing managers' sense of involvement and destroying organisational morale. We have also found that managers'

perceptions of the managerial styles that exist in the public sector are not amenable to transforming local authorities into learning organisations.

Well, that is one – rather cynical and downbeat - interpretation of the problem. Is it a valid interpretation? What do we do now? I wish I knew.

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