

Managing for independence and social action

- Tired of filling out pointless forms?
- Excluded from decisions that affect your work?
- Want to create ways of managing which promote autonomy and help you get the really important stuff done?

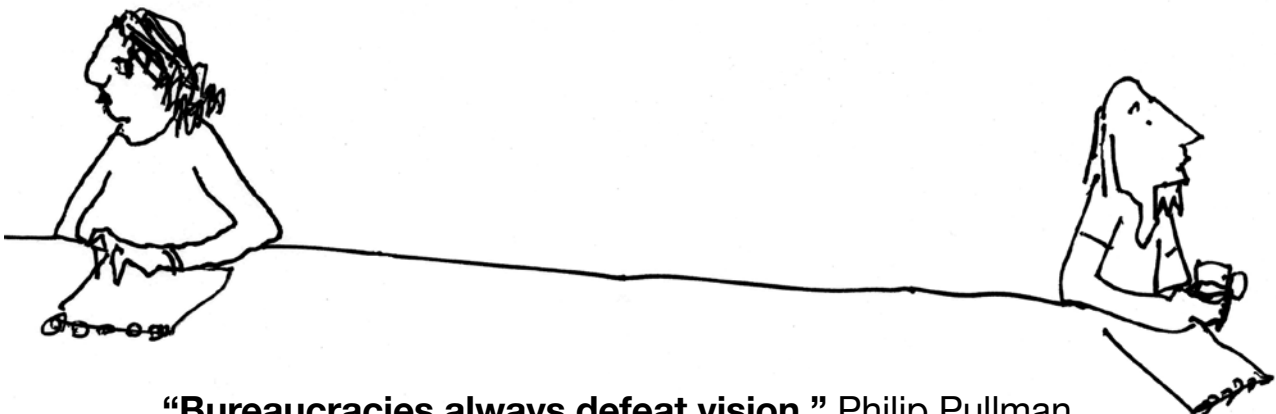
National Coalition for Independent Action (NCIA) is an alliance of individuals and organisations who believe that we need to unite in independent voluntary and community action. This leaflet sets out the dangers of top-down approaches to management and offers suggestions about what we can do to spark debate and change.

If you're a manager in a voluntary sector organisation, chances are that funding forms, targets, outcomes, monitoring, inspections, contracts and tendering will be an increasing part of your working life. Some agencies navigate these pressures successfully and keep their purpose and soul intact. Others find their inspiration dries up in the face of heavy-handed performance management practices they should never have adopted.

We believe that these practices are changing the nature of the charitable sector in ways that do not fit its values or activities. NCIA is calling on people engaged in voluntary or community action to explore more democratic and effective models. Being well managed is more than just being efficient with our services, it is about changing society for the better.

THE PROBLEM

Many voluntary agencies, particularly those providing services, have adopted models of management antagonistic to social action and change. The origins are to be found in prescriptive funding requirements, as well as some private sector business practices adopted by national and local government. Associated with these models is a language which enforces and obscures underlying unequal power relations. Top-down requirements provide little opportunity for people to shape their own world and the services they require.



“Bureaucracies always defeat vision.” Philip Pullman

COMMISSIONING AND THE CONTRACT CULTURE

Funds now come with inspection and regulatory strings attached and for work which satisfies government agendas, often at the expense of community interests. Prescribed terms and conditions leave little room for other work outside the contract specifications, especially traditional roles of advocacy and collective action. Agencies compete with each other. Learning, flexibility, responsiveness, innovation and co-operation are undermined.

TARGET PRACTICE

Voluntary action is increasingly controlled through targets which create expectations which may not fit the context or the needs of communities. Targets can make services run in irrational ways, only counting what can be counted, put into a form and given a timescale. Targets are time-consuming and can lead to anxiety and stress. We need to know the results of what we do, but many outcomes of social action only emerge as the work is done. The cult of pre-ordained outcomes pretends to know the future, ignores it when it changes and can lead to repetitive and unreflective practice.

JUST TICK HERE

Our world is awash with mechanistic quality toolkits which persuade us to put on clothing which is stiff, expensive and doesn't suit us. There is no evidence

that such approaches give a better result, indeed there is increasing anecdotal evidence that they waste time and money. Tick box quality assurance stops us applying real quality assurance through 'the terrier', the ability to think critically, be curious and remain dissatisfied, whatever evidence suggests.

MORE CHIEFS THAN INDIANS

Management structure, style and level of organisational democracy has been changing in the voluntary and community sector. Co-ordinators became managers, who changed to directors and now prefer to call themselves chief executives. Flat structures, particularly in the larger agencies, are changing into top-down hierarchies populated by layers of managers. We are seeing the 'career manager', for whom the cause espoused by the agency is irrelevant: it is simply a step on their way up the ladder. These managers often don't know the nature of the work being done or the communities the organisation works with. They are focused on bureaucratic processes at the expense of community needs. Management styles have become more authoritarian, with an increasing absence of accountability. The critical role of frontline workers and users in informing practice and shaping responses is threatened. Unions hardly figure. Excessive management salaries and inequitable pay differentials are increasing. Some workplaces have been invaded by a culture of fear, demoralisation and conformity.

SWIM AGAINST THE TIDE

Little Fish is a social justice organisation that supports individuals under pressure and campaigns on equality issues. The agency made a charity of the year-type arrangement with a commercial organisation, let's call it Loan Sharks Ltd. This resulted in the online staff forum buzzing with debate. One frontline worker pointed out that Loan Sharks had a reputation for trapping poor families into a cycle of debt. Another said that staff of Loan Sharks had been reported for intimidating customers. Workers from across the organisation produced a variety of proof including national news reports about the unethical practices of Loan Sharks and the suffering caused by the company in poor communities. Several questioned whether this company was consistent with the values of Little Fish and the interests of its clients. Some wondered if there might be a media backlash against Little Fish. Management responded: the agreement was cancelled and the vetting procedure for potential corporate partners changed. Little Fish staff were accustomed to advocating for their clients. This time they also empowered themselves.



OUR MANIFESTO: WHAT WE WANT TO SEE

We will create models and approaches which fit our purposes and provide ways of working which **nourish our self-determination**. The principles underpinning the way we run ourselves will be consistent with those we apply in our work with individuals and communities. This will mean that organisational form and culture, management practices and styles will vary.

Systems and practices will be governed by:

- proof that they lead to change and to **good services** and can address the factors that affect communities
- a commitment to **social justice** and reform, as well as to providing services
- benefits for, accountability to and **solidarity with users of the service**, local people and communities
- measures which ensure that **staff and volunteers are able to do their work well**, with motivation and enthusiasm.

We will put effort into developing the **creativity and skills** needed to design and operate practices suitable for a particular agency and its relationship with the outside world.

A **commitment to the cause** and solidarity with those who share this is as important as professional codes of practice. This will be reflected in recruitment and training.

Passion, excitement, fun and anger will be encouraged and required to balance the more detached nature of professional practice. Criticism, conflict and difference will be valued as a chance to talk and explore.

There will be **more practitioner/managers** who know the content of what they are managing.

We will **move from targets to intentions**, where changes are seen as indicative of growth, learning and flexibility. We will know that change takes time. The results we get with our work will be shaped by those who might benefit.

Quality assurance, and other forms of **accountability**, will be tailored by us to fit our activities.

Workers at all levels will be trusted to make judgements in their areas of activity and to have influence over the organisation as a whole. They will be involved in producing new policies and practices, will have influence over management styles and will participate in internal forums as part of decision-making.

A **recognised union** or other worker representation will be in place.

Our relationship with funders will be built on an equal and assertive footing. We will negotiate contracts which do not compromise benefits for communities or conditions for workers. We will be **honest with funders** and they will trust us to know best how to manage our work and tell them the results. We will say no to money if it compromises our independent voice.

Pay rates will be kept within an **agreed difference between the highest and lowest paid** staff. Ethical financial practices will be in place, including for investments and pensions. There will be practices that avoid exploitation and discrimination and support ecological sustainability.



HOW WE CAN GET WHAT WE WANT

Get talking: with colleagues, service users, managers, your unions, other groups, NCIA. Find spaces and places in your working life to reflect with others, understand and analyse critically what is happening and work out alternatives and strategies for resistance. Share hopeful stories. Give solidarity in adversity.

Make power visible: who has it, how is it used, who can influence what? Say what you think. Avoid language which is dishonest, exclusive or based on the ideology of business rather than that of charity.

Organise and act: work up a plan of what you want to see. Use all available resources: activists, volunteers, skills and knowledge. Find out what others are doing. Support each other emotionally, financially and legally.

Be tactical: decide what your options are. Consider how the law could support your position. Play the game or exit on principle. Take realistic bite size chunks.

Be brave: say no to funding which compromises you, even if this means a smaller endeavour. Negotiate on contracts. Create your own quality assurance system. Stop going to government-led meetings and set up your own forums. Co-operate with rather than compete against fellows.

Practice what you preach: treat your colleagues and staff how you aspire to treat the people who use your service. Check that your job descriptions and trustee roles reflect the principles of independent voluntary action. Provide management training which challenges private sector ideologies. Ask workers whether your agency is doing what it should do

Get help: share the resources and people you find. Check whether your local college or university will work with you to provide evidence for your arguments. Influence your national and local networks to take up the argument and to provide support and training which incorporates the principles of managing for independence and social action. Come to an NCIA assembly meeting to meet others in your situation and join in our campaigns. Convince your agency to have an NCIA independence audit to find out what you could do to develop managing for independence and social action.



'..She's never been the same since they told her to demonstrate her cross cutting network targeting strategy...'

JOIN THE ACTION!

If you would like to know more about NCIA and get involved, please have a look at our website: www.independentaction.net
(You can sign up to our newsletter there.)

Or contact us at: info@independentaction.net