

Structure, Strategy and All That Jazz

A RESPONSE TO MICHAEL WILLSON

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'If I knew where jazz was going, I'd be there already!'
Humphrey Lyttelton

It should be commonplace to state that an organisation should adopt the structure which is appropriate for its chosen strategy. For example, if the primary strategy of an organisation is to provide a regular, predictable, consistent service (such as the Inland Revenue or a Railway), then it is important that there be a machine bureaucratic system with strict universal rules about every part of the work process which every employee follows, to ensure that the same service is provided consistently throughout the organisation (in theory at least). A different structure is required however if the strategy of the organisation depends primarily on the discretion of the worker at the front line (eg the Probation Service).

But of course real life is not as straightforward as these stereotypes. In particular it is rare that an organisation will be following one strategy alone. The primary strategy of the Prison Service for example is to provide a regular consistent service (human containment) but there are also expectations that it should be able to achieve change — and its machine bureaucratic structure means that it is poorly equipped for this secondary strategy. Although we are a much smaller organisation, it appears that the position of the Probation Service is even more complicated. Until SNOP we all had different ideas of what our main strategy should be; now that we have SNOP there are still some who would not accept its formula, or at least have major reservations about it. It often seems that the Probation Service has a multitude of strategies (to service the courts, to service the prisons, to help our statutory clients, to become a community resource) and sometimes we choose between them, and sometimes we attempt the lot.

Three Strategies in Probation *Planned Change*

It is generally true that we think that we are about achieving change. Traditionally this was change in the client; nowadays it is more about changes in the workings of the criminal justice system. There is a way of achieving this; management by objectives is becoming a favourite approach. Its particular value is that this offers a method of measuring success. One of its dangers is that those measurements of success become the only criteria by which the work of the organisation is assessed. Therefore, as one of our safeguards, perhaps we should make it clear that the use of objectives is our criterion for success only in certain areas of our work. This area of work could be defined as where our strategy is one of achieving planned change. The best 'pure' structure to implement this is the divisionalised one, with each local manager held accountable for achieving locally defined objectives. (Michael Willson's paper illustrates this, and also highlights some of the problems this creates.)

Consistent Service

Next, however, we need to look at two other examples of where our strategy is quite different. One is the need for consistent service in certain key areas of work. We don't always like to admit that this is an important part of our work, but it would be most unwise to ignore the fact that we are expected to service the courts consistently, to see parolees regularly (for example), and in child abuse cases, in particular very high standards of consistent monitoring are now expected. In these cases in particular, although the scope for the individual discretion of the officer is not completely removed, it comes a clear second to seeing that the basic rules of the organisation are carried out. It

is in these areas in which probation management is likely to be seen to be moving at its most bureaucratic. Here the most senior probation officer behaves less like a general manager of a 'division of the organisation, but more like a foreman of a highly centralised organisation. Hence a different structural system is needed to achieve a different strategy, but this is at the same time, within the same organisation, by the same members of staff.

Creativity

But there is at least a third strategy/structure overlay existing within the Probation Service (and there are probably more). This third strategy can be contrasted with the earlier idea of planned change (where management by objectives was useful) and we could call it unplanned change, but to put it at its most positive it is about creativity. In our ordinary front line social work, our spontaneous creative actions are often our most important or successful pieces of work. It may be pleasing to carry out an agreed plan with a probationer (whether it was task-centred casework or just agreed help and advice), but for me it was always achieving the unexpected which gave the most satisfaction. Instinctively doing the right thing at the right time (for a change!) might bring a sudden expected change in attitude or circumstances for the most unpromising client, and these creative interventions are often by their very nature the very things which cannot be planned in advance. You cannot plan to have an idea or an insight — to plan it is to achieve it — any more than Humphrey Lyttelton could plan where jazz was going without achieving it. The point here is that this happens not just in an individual officer's work, but within the organisation. A group, or pair, of officers can suddenly recognise a local need, and at the same time their own capacity to deal with it, in a way which cannot easily be planned from the top. Some of our best work, perhaps the vital spark in our work, is best carried out by the individual creativity of our 'Skilled Sophisticated Staff'. It is in those areas of our work, where being creative should be made our main strategy, that the adhocracy becomes the appropriate structural system.

Adhocracies, such as NASA and the National Film Board of Canada, become very successful creative organisations, achieving the very things which cannot be planned in advance. (The films themselves in the case of the National Film Board, or the method of getting to the moon as in the case

of NASA. However, it is worth noting that an adhocracy is much poorer at supplying consistent routine service, and now that space shuttle flights have become a routine, it is probable that the shuttle disaster highlights the need for NASA to adapt its structure to its new strategy.) Probation will need to maintain an 'adhocratic' overlay if it wishes to encourage the development of its most creative work.

In Conclusion

For probation, I have been suggesting that there are at least three different types of strategy which we have to employ within our organisation, and that each of these requires its own appropriate structure. Yet we need to fulfil these different structural systems at the same time with the same personnel. We are almost certainly not unique in this as an organisation, but it clearly means that we need to learn a lot more about effective structuring to achieve this. If possible, such learning should enable us to maintain not only the achievement of relevant objectives and our consistency in key areas but also enable us to maintain and extend our creativity as well.

1. Michael Willson, 'Management, Retention and Control of Skilled Sophisticated Staff in the late 80s' *Probation Journal*, Vol 31, No 1, March 1984.

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