USING WORKSPACE AS A DRIVER FOR CULTURE CHANGE

CONTEXT

The changing world of work

Public and voluntary / third sector organisations are being consistently challenged by central government to do more for less, modernise, make savings, be more customer focused, deliver the highest quality services and to be flexible and responsive. The pace of change is fast and the pressures great.

This changing world has been described by Donald Schon as '*the world beyond the stable state*'[1].

'*This is a world that many businesses, non-profits, and government organisations have already begun to experience......In this world, established values and assumptions are continually challenged; new competitors appear from unexpected locations; product life cycles grow shorter; deregulation undermines the old order; innovation sweeps established products and services aside; and customers demand greater speed, quality, and cost effectiveness. Even effective solutions have only transient value.*'[2]

Leadership and organisational responses

A learning organisation

A learning organisation has a culture that anticipates and responds to change, complexity and uncertainty in a positive, effective and flexible manner. In learning organisations people at all levels, individually and collectively are continually increasing their capacity to produce results they really care about.

The idea of the learning organisation is becoming increasingly important given the growing complexity and uncertainty of the current environment. Peter Senge has commented that 'the rate at which organisations learn may become the only sustainable source of competitive advantage'.

A learning organisation will have

- o A learning approach to strategy – founded on trust and open to experimentation, rapid prototyping and sharing within and between organisations
- o A participative approach to policy making and service design – with staff and the broader community actively involved in identifying future direction, and co-creating future services and provision
- o Enabling structures – roles, teams, departments are seen as temporary structures that can change quickly and easily to meet the needs of the job, user or innovation requirements.
- o A learning climate – leaders see their main task as fostering & facilitating learning and experimentation to further achievement of organisational objectives.

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- Self-development opportunities for all – the organisation makes resources available for learning and employees are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning. Particular emphasis is placed upon developing frontline staff that come into contact with members of the public and clients.

If public and third / voluntary sector organisations consciously begin to work on transforming themselves into learning organisations, they are likely to become more resilient, flexible and successful in the face of the constant reductions in funding and demands for performance improvement.

Living Systems

'These days, a different idea for organisations is surfacing. We want organisations to be adaptive, flexible, self renewing, resilient, learning, intelligent – attributes found only in living systems'[3]

For many years we have approached organisations as if they were machines – mechanisms we can direct and control. The science of living systems, on the other hand, suggests that we can create self organising, sustainable, flexible and adaptive organisations by learning from nature. Rather than focussing on trying to control and direct organisations, we need to focus on creating the conditions in which self organisation will be nurtured: Margaret Wheatley has identified these as the domains of identity, information, and relationships.

- Identity is the 'sense making' capacity of an organisation, the extent to which the intentions, principles and purpose of the organisation and its members are shared and understood
- Information is the 'medium' of an organisation – *'it is information – unplanned, uncontrolled, abundant, superfluous – that creates the conditions for the emergence of fast, well integrated, effective responses.'*[4]
- Relationships are the pathways' of an organisation – without connections nothing happens. In self organising organisations, people need to free to make wide ranging and diverse, planned and accidental connections within and beyond the organisation.

Central to the living systems approach is the understanding that a living system can't be directed, it can only be disturbed. The effects of this disturbance will depend on the extent to which the domains of identity, information, and relationships have been (and continue to be) developed within the organisation. This is clearly a major challenge to our traditional views of leadership.

Communication and networks

In complex adaptive systems growth, adaptation and change are generated through multiple layers of self-generating and self-reproducing networks. Karen Stephenson, a social networks theorist, identifies these as 'networks of trust', which co-exist alongside the explicit organisational hierarchy.[5] She identifies six different knowledge networks which will be present to a greater or lesser extent in any organisational culture.

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In a learning organisation these networks will be strong, resilient, balanced and extensive, and will facilitate the organisation's ability to be responsive, flexible, innovative, creative and effective.

WORKSPACE AS A DRIVER FOR CULTURAL CHANGE

It is becoming more widely recognised that the process of consultation, design and development of new workspace arrangements, and subsequent occupation, can be an important driver for cultural and organisational change:

'Today, enlightened managers are responding by turning their workplaces into drivers for change….the modernisation of government is leading to a better focus on business objectives that also support organisational aspirations around greater efficiency, increased effectiveness and improved image – mirroring and evolving developments in the private sector. These visions are being realised by concentrating efforts on providing the right culture, management style, business processes and infrastructure to attract and retain the best people and support them in doing their work well. The workplace is part of this essential infrastructure, closely aligned to work activities and organisational culture, making it possible for people to work in new and different ways and creating a strong visual expression of the organisation's values.' [6]

New thinking and approaches to how we use and develop workspace can contribute towards organisational and cultural change, both through

- o the process of involving people in re-imagining, rethinking and redesigning the workplace, and
- o the product of that rethinking and redesign process – a reconfigured workplace that supports the creation and development of the conditions for a self organising organisation - identity, information and relationships

Process

The process of engaging staff in the co-invention of their workplace through collaboration can be a powerful driver for cultural change. It can provide an opportunity for thinking radically about the whole organisation and the relationships and dynamics within the organisation, but in what can sometimes be a safer context than tackling these issues head on.

The process can help develop the conditions for developing a self organising organisation:

- o Identity will be developed and shared more widely as people start to figure out the types of spaces and relationships best suited to the vision, goals and ethos of the organisation

- o Information will be shared and common understandings developed as people work across existing organisational and project boundaries. People will develop a far greater understanding of what happens throughout the organisation
- o Relationships and connections will be made with new people in new situations, opening up new possibilities for collaborative work throughout the organisation

The process of reinventing the work place is not a 'once and for all' process. Simple and immediate changes can be identified and trialled from the start, and pilot projects can be implemented in one or two areas to test out practicality, impact and effect. These early interventions can contribute to a changing culture, and open up further opportunities and options not previously considered.

It is in the nature of a living system that there will be no final, finished project, each intervention and iteration of the process will lead to new possibilities and opportunities. The more flexible, adaptable, self organising and intelligent the organisation becomes, the more the working environment will need to adapt and change to accommodate and support this new organisation.

The design of the workplace and workspaces

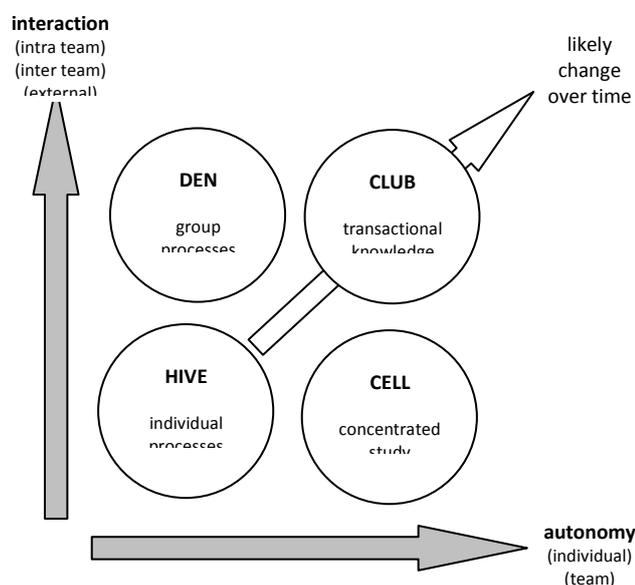### A useful framework for thinking about workspace

There is a developing understanding that much office and workplace planning is based on patterns of work which are no longer appropriate. The changing needs of knowledge based and creative, learning organisations suggest new and different work and occupancy patterns, different use of space and IT and different forms of organisation[7]:

	Conventional	New
Work patterns	Routine processes Individual tasks Isolated work	Creative knowledge work Groups, teams, projects Interactive work
Occupancy patterns	Single workplace Individual 'owned' workstation Fixed day (9-5)	Distributed work locations Extended / irregular timetable Workspace on as needed basis
Space, layout and furniture	Hierarchy based on status Individual space more important than interactive meeting spaces	Shared groupwork spaces Individual task based space
IT	Routine data processing Fixed positions	Technology supports creative knowledge work and communication Mobile / wireless interconnectivity
Organisation	Organised in functional teams	Organised in multi disciplinary / project based teams

Frank Duffy has identified four generic models of workplace organisation - the hive, the cell, the den and the club, appropriate to different types of office based work:

- o Hive: this has been the typical office environment in large public and private sector organisations. Work patterns are relatively inflexible, staff have routine and repetitive administrative tasks and little autonomy. Each member of staff has their own standard workspace in a largely open plan layout. Often strongly hierarchical through space allocation and location.
- o Cell: a private space (enclosed office or individual screened workstation) where individuals carry out isolated knowledge work. Typically, staff will operate fairly independently with little need for supervision or interaction with colleagues.
- o Den: an environment in which project and group work predominates, accommodating individual and shared work and meeting spaces. Team members with need for interaction and pooling of skills.
- o Club: an environment to accommodate constantly changing work processes, with complex and intermittent work patterns. Provides a diverse range of work settings – team and project bases, breakout / social space for group and individual use, enclosed spaces for individual / concentrated work. People do not have fixed work stations, but choose the environment suited to their current task. The current development of the international Hub network (for example the Islington Hub http://islington.the-hub.net/public/) is an example of a more collaborative, non corporate development of this type of workspace.

The choice of these different organisational models will depend upon the nature of the work undertaken by staff within the organisation, and the focus of the organisation. Of particular importance are the degree of autonomy of individual staff, the need for interaction and communication between staff, and the degree of complexity and change within the organisation. A learning organisation, suited to 'the world beyond the stable state' is likely to be characterised by a high degree of both interaction and autonomy.

interaction
(intra team)
(inter team)
(external)

likely change over time

DEN
group processes

CLUB
transactional knowledge

HIVE
individual processes

CELL
concentrated study

autonomy
(individual)
(team)

Living Systems and networks

The organisation of the workplace can contribute to nurturing the conditions that will support the development of a self organising organisation.

- o Identity can be developed and reinforced through the congruence between the organisation's ethos, vision and values, and the organisation and layout of physical space. We talk about distributed leadership, minimal hierarchy and teamwork, for example, but do the offices of our senior managers send out the same signals?
- o Information can be made more widely available through planned physical interventions - interactive notice boards, information walls, hot idea points, well stocked and managed and comfortable resource areas etc. It can also be spread more widely through workplace planning that increases the likelihood of overheard conversations and unscheduled encounters, that displays a transparency and visibility that will encourage curiosity and questions.
- o Relationships can be encouraged through the ways in which different departments and teams are organised and located, and through the casual connections encouraged by circulation routes, breakout areas, kitchen facilities, water fountains etc. '*People need opportunities to 'bump up' against others in the system, making the unplanned connections that spawn new ventures or better integrated responses*'[8]

These relationships and connections can be further encouraged through developing an understanding of the 'networks of trust' in the organisation, and the roles that different individuals play within these networks. The physical organisation of space, the layout of workspaces, the location of teams and key people within teams, and the physical opportunities provided for casual and 'unofficial' contact and connection can all contribute to the nurturing of existing networks, and to the encouragement of new networks.

Diversity and individual needs

The needs of the organisation will only be met if the diverse needs of individuals within the organisation are properly considered – both through the process of workplace design and in the design of particular workspaces.

Different learning and information processing styles (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic), different intelligences, different cultural and experiential expectations all affect our requirements of the workplace, our need for privacy/ interaction, quiet / noise, tidiness / mess, movement / stillness etc. This diversity needs to be nourished if we are to effectively engage with staff and provide appropriate, efficient and effective workspace.

This diversity can also be nurtured and supported through the development of more flexible working arrangements, both in terms of times and location of work. More flexible work patterns can provide major opportunities for developing more flexible and connected workspace, and for making much more effective use of existing space.

Ethos and image

The type of workspace an organisation occupies, and the quality of its design[9] can say a lot – to staff, partners, customers and the public.

- A modern, open, flexible, attractive and effective workplace will help staff to feel valued, and can help reinforce an open and collaborative culture. Removing the physical boundaries between teams and departments can signal the intention to work more closely together across departmental boundaries.
- To partners, an innovative and forward looking, open and accessible building, sends a statement about how the organisation wants to work, about its ambition and aspirations. Improved meeting, social and conference facilities can all facilitate easier and more collaborative working with partners.
- To customers and the public, an appropriately designed building can be an invitation to become involved, it can promote a culture of transparency and inclusion, opening up the political process and offering opportunities for active engagement with local citizens and communities.
- An appropriately designed energy efficient and sustainable building can also send out a clear signal to the whole community that it values and takes environmental issues seriously, and is prepared to act as a role model and exemplar for other businesses and local organisations in promoting sustainability.

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[1] Schon,D (1971) Beyond the Stable State

[2] Horgen,TH, Joroff,ML, Porter,WL, Schon,DA (1999) Excellence By Design – Transformimg Workplace and Work Practice

[3] Wheatley,M (2005) Finding Our Way: Leadership For an Uncertain Time

[4] Wheatley,M (2005) ibid

[5] Kleiner, A (2003) Karen Stephenson's Theory of Trust

[6] Allen,T, Bell,A, Graham,R, Hardy,B, Swaffer,F (2004) Working without walls: An insight into the transforming government workplace,

[7],The ideas elaborated in this section on current thinking, are from: Duffy, F (1997) The New Office

[8] Wheatley,M (2005) ibid

[9] CABE, (2005) The impact of office design on business performance

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