

Prioritising people and relationships starts with trust.

Sometimes we lose sight of a simple truth about systems: they are made up of people (crediting [Stanford Social Innovation Review](#) for that gem). However, the prevailing wisdom of New Public Management approaches for the last 30+ years has encouraged the public service to look at people at best, as customers, at worst as widgets to be processed, or problems to manage.

During one of our early Stewards Group meetings for [The Possibility Partnership](#), a CEO shared an experience engaging with a community member frustrated by their interactions with the social services system. The sentence that struck home was, “Don't offer me counselling, when what I need is a fridge!” It was a stark and powerful illustration of the artificial and sometimes obstructive boundaries that can shape the relationships between service staff and people in communities. Often, what people want, and need, is at right angles to what ‘the system’ is allowed to provide.

The great news is that we are now seeing a growing challenge to traditional ways of working, leading to better outcomes for people, and it's happening everywhere. More on that later, but first we'll explore how we got to where we are today.

How ideas on ‘efficiency’ removed the “human” from the human services system

A booming economy and the growth of big businesses through the 1970s and 1980s, alongside a growing view that government services were too expensive and inefficient gave rise to increasing support for the application of more ‘businesslike’ approaches to public administration. Practically, this has meant a focus on management and metrics in the delivery of public service, and an appetite for competition between providers, all with the aim of increasing efficiency and driving value for money. The impacts of such an approach, embedded at scale, have been profound.

Traditional management approaches break complex strategies into sub strategies and goals, each of which can ultimately be owned in a different part of the organisation. By holding each part of the organisation accountable for their own set of goals, the belief is that collectively everything will add back up to success at the level of the whole venture. It's an approach that might work well in a factory setting. But when we apply such a reductive approach to how we engage with real people we start to see inherent challenges and predictable failures.

Looking through a fragmented system makes people appear fragmented too

If we only look at people through an organisational lens of Housing, or Disability, or Justice, we see a very small part of who they are. More than that, we see them only in terms of a specific problem to be solved or a specific need to address – they need a house, or they need a job. To state the obvious, people are complex and unique – their outcomes are the result of myriad interactions and experiences.

It should not be a surprise to learn that the more points of engagement a person has with ‘the system’, the less effective the system response is. We know, for example, that some of the most successful approaches to reducing recidivism rely on providing a combination of supports for offenders leaving the prison system, which might include safe and stable housing, training and education, employment

support, family support, counselling, health care and community connection. Getting just one or two of these things right isn't enough, which is why across Australia, 42.5% of released prisoners find themselves back inside within just 2 years. Unfortunately, in a system that doesn't inherently make space for building relationships and asking what people need, these connected, coherent and mutually supporting needs can seem disparate and fragmented.

This approach is not only reductive of people, but also of the role of government

When government is seen only as a means of delivering services efficiently, it also loses something. Over-reliance on process, control and transactions results in mutual erosion of trust between people and government. People are seen as bureaucrats or clients, creating a self-reinforcing feedback loop where human capabilities continue to be designed out of the system. Through a recent process of extensive engagement with people and communities across the country, ReMADE heard that people want a public service that is warm, wise and willing. That is a public service that cares, and enables people to participate more fully in their democracy. This goal won't be achieved from within the confines of a service delivery machine – [public servants also need to be liberated](#) to also connect in more human ways.

Reimagining possibility – the evidence

So, back to the good news: there's growing understanding, and evidence, that it doesn't have to be this way! In some of the very first conversations about The Possibility Partnership, we took inspiration from Hilary Cottam's work in the UK through her book [Radical Help](#). In it, she shares examples of how relational and integrated models of support that put more power back in the hands of people and their families, led to significantly improved outcomes across a range of service settings.

Many more recent UK examples are highlighted through the excellent work of Human Learning Systems, who generously [open-source case studies and other resources online](#). A recent [Guardian article](#) covered how such approaches not only deliver better results but also save money – even in the short term. Thurrock Council saved £1m in its first two years when they took a more joined-up approach to services for people experiencing homelessness with a dual diagnosis of mental ill-health and addiction. Here in Australia, we're delighted to see echos of Hilary's work in [The Sunshine Project](#), led by Anglicare WA, Ruah, and 100 Families WA, which is illustrating how similar principles can be implemented successfully within an Australian context.

The [James Martin Institute for Public Policy](#) recently released a [paper](#) calling for a more relational approach to care in the child protection and out of home care systems in NSW, though the messages are applicable both in other contexts and other jurisdictions. The paper notes that there is strong emerging evidence for the efficacy of more relational approaches of care, and importantly goes on to talk about the kinds of systems change that would support it.

We're also seeing the life-changing impacts of Colin Falconer's "[advantaged thinking](#)" brought to Australia via the Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) and establishment of the [Foyer Foundation](#), shifting mindsets and approaches to focus on the strengths, aspirations and capabilities of people. Many organisations have redesigned their work around advantaged thinking (including BSL, Mission Australia, and Uniting NSW/ACT), especially through expanding Youth Foyers across Australia. Foyers are integrated learning and accommodation settings for young people at risk of, or experiencing homelessness. Through 'Advantaged Thinking' approaches,

Foyers nurture young people's goals and talents while building skills for life. A [recent report](#) found that 80% of young people exit Foyers into stable housing, 65% gain secure decent employment and 60% are less likely to be involved in the justice system.

Across service providers, there's a growing shift from offering more traditional 'supervisors' towards 'coaches' whose objectives are to build relationships rather than tick boxes to meet immediate needs and move people through the system. [Mission Australia](#) is putting families and people at the centre of their housing and employment services, making sure coaches have the time to build trust and longer-term relationships, resulting in people (who are usually disengaged from the system) feeling heard, seen and supported to change their own lives. [The Smith Family's](#) Family Practice Framework outlines a relationship-based partnership approach, that works with families to identify long term goals and their own solutions. Parents and caregivers are ambitious and committed to working together to make sure their children have a better future. But sometimes outside factors like eviction, relationship breakups, or newly diagnosed mental health conditions can throw things off course. The strength of trust in their relationship with their coach becomes a link into the system to get what they need to get back on track.

While we're seeing incredible outcomes from relational ways of working for young people, families, people in aged care and people living with disabilities in places across the country, this work is still relatively new and often happening outside business as usual, or as an exception. We need to shift system conditions so it's easier to do this work and make sure the system works with and for people across the board.

The way forward

We need to start with a conversation about the purpose of our service systems. Drawing on some of the examples already cited, perhaps this means shifting from a philosophy of 'control and protect' to one of 'care and connect' (or "compliance to alliance" per CPD's [Putting People First](#) paper). Such a shift in purpose has considerable flow on effects to other parts of the system. For instance,

- Commissioning approaches might shift the emphasis from targets and activities, to enabling relationships, harnessing learning, and building mutual accountability for outcomes.
- Our workforce needs to be empowered and skilled to engage in relational practice, trusted to use effective judgement to be in relationship with community, and freed up from unnecessary restrictions, boundaries and endless administration.
- Critically, mindsets need to shift, away from a harmful belief that people in the system (both services and clients) need to be managed and controlled, to a belief that most people in the system will act in good faith.

Changing the system will also require us collaborating differently, across the sector, so we're breaking down silos, understanding and tackling the root causes of disadvantage, and sharing and devolving power to and with communities, all of which we will unpack more in upcoming articles. We are working to create more opportunities to [meet in the middle](#) so all of this becomes more possible to do together.

Ultimately, prioritising people and relationships demands significant change, at multiple levels. It means reconceiving of our organisations and systems less as factories, more as networks of relationships; and people less as widgets or customers and more as trusted and capable partners in change.

How would things look different, if we defaulted to trust in people?

Learn more: <https://www.thepossibilitypartnership.org.au/>