Sharing and devolving power needs us to act, not just stand aside

"Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better."
— Maya Angelou

[The Possibility Partnership](#) began with a simple but important acknowledgement – for some people, today's system is not working well enough, and we risk leaving them behind. We're not saying the whole system is broken – it's working as designed and is benefitting huge numbers of people. However, when we zoom in to parts of the system where we find complex, intersecting drivers of poor outcomes, it's clear that sometimes we need a very different approach. If we keep doing the same things and accepting the same outcomes, we must accept our complicity in the status quo. To move beyond acceptance, we need to take active steps to do better, to change things both in ourselves and in the broader systems we're a part of. How we – in all parts of the system – understand, use and share our power sits right at the heart of the work.

To shift systems, we must shift power

Charlie Leadbeater and Jennie Winhall identify power as one of the [four keys for systems change](#), and they define it particularly in relation to the power to determine how resources flow, what and who takes priority and what is counted as a good outcome. It's a useful frame. Using this as a lens, we can see that today, power tends to be held centrally, within a hierarchical structure, and is typically exerted in a top-down direction. There is a reasonable argument we can make for why this might be appropriate when consistency and efficiency are important drivers, and when services can work relatively universally. However, when we work in complexity, context matters.

In a [previous article](#), we described the importance of a shift toward more relational ways of conceiving, designing, leading and delivering across our human services systems. To be in relationship with people, to understand them, and find the unique pathways through which they can access their own agency means we need the freedom to colour outside the lines of more prescriptive responses. Together with people and communities, we need to be able to make decisions, to exercise good judgement, to have discretion over how resources might be used, and to do the things that we would never think to commission at scale. We need to create the conditions where more power can be used where it is needed – much closer to the people, families and communities the system is here to serve.

The call to share and devolve power has been gaining strength in recent times, and we are not short of advice for people 'in power' to 'hand over the reins', to 'let go', or to 'just get out of the way'. It's often good advice, but it can be hard to follow. It's worth thinking about why.

Power takes many forms

We often imagine that power sits at the top of the hierarchies we see drawn up on paper. All we need to do is to get those folks to change their ways and everything will change – tada! As we have unpacked in previous articles though, people at all

levels within the system often feel like they do not have the power to change things themselves. Sometimes we all feel powerless to change a system that feels too big, complex, and stuck in its ways.

Power can be hard to see, and it shows itself in a multitude of different ways. Expressions of power are baked into our service systems, our cultures, and our structures in ways that are hard to disentangle – and we can exert it without even realising. Each time we ask a family to retell their story to see if it meets our criteria to help them. Each time we ask for a report that focuses on the activities we delivered rather than the difference it makes for people. Each time we withdraw support, due to following policy. Each time we ask people to put forward their proposal in yet another different form to meet our standards, to get the funding they desperately need. Yes, the system asks us to act in all of these ways, but each time we do, we are made complicit in the status quo.

Risks are real, how we respond is a choice

Particularly in highly sensitive areas such as child protection or disability services, understanding and mitigating the risks of causing harm must be a top priority. Equally, in a polarised, sensationalist media environment, there are legitimate concerns for reputational damage if things go wrong. Especially when funded by public money, government and service organisation leaders are sometimes held in the vice between regulatory pressures and community expectations and may find themselves having to consider investing significant energy toward managing these risks. However, we need to ensure that the management of risk is measured and fit for purpose and consider the unintended consequences of mitigation strategies.

Traditional risk management approaches tend toward increasing levels of control, monitoring, and reporting – in essence removing human agency, in favour of centralised rules. Effective rules are of course crucial, however, more rules are not necessarily better. In highly complex and shifting environments, removing autonomy in favour of rigid compliance may be more likely to be the cause of failure than the solution. It becomes a risk in its own right. When having a case worker sitting with you through an angst-ridden visit to the GP could literally be the difference between life and death, we should not celebrate compliance with the policy that states that our duty of care for a client stops at referral. Hilary Cottam reminds us that we are in a world of "radical uncertainty" where "future solutions are uncertain, complex and difficult." The risk in systematising the same things we've always done means nothing will change. And that may be the greatest risk of all.

Letting go is an important first step

The dire progress on Closing the Gap targets is a live real-world example of acknowledging the role of the power dynamics and modelling change to shift it. The founding members of Allies for Children, a unique and influential strategic alliance working together to address the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children in care, have recognised the need to dismantle traditional power structures and in turn not only share power, but to also step away from holding it. Our TPP colleagues Life Without Barriers and The Benevolent Society are two founding members of the Allies for Children alongside Act for Kids, Barnardos Australia, OzChild, Mackillop Family Services, Key Assets. Together they have committed to supporting key transformational reform in partnership with

Aboriginal leadership for First Nations children, young people and families. Their commitments include the transition of services they currently provide to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children back to community control, wide-ranging non-compete commitments on services for First peoples where Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations are ready and able to provide them, and, most importantly, large scale advocacy for reform to advance self –determination in child and family services.

Catherine Liddle, CEO of SNAICC (the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care) has called this a "bold" first move, that also requires appropriate resources to ensure community-controlled services have what they need to be successful.

Sharing and devolving power isn't done by just 'getting out of the way'. We have to unpick the many ways that power has been embedded across the system – breaking and changing the rules, together, as we go. That means taking time to invest in relationships, build trust, create space for conversations and listen deeply to understand what is needed and what everyone's role can and should be. It also means preparing to play a 'systems stewardship' role through helping the system to absorb the lessons we learn along the way and incorporate them into a new set of rules that work for more people.

If we're not willing to do the hard work to redirect resource flows and to challenge structures, culture and rules, what starts as an intent to shift power risks ending in failure. System rules don't change by themselves, and they will keep placing demands on people until we change them together.

We can use our power, even as we share it

We believe that creating the conditions for shifting power is an active, not a passive process. It's a fundamental act of good system leadership.

Whilst that maybe sounds like a lot more work than we hoped, the good news is firstly that this gives us ways to loosen control, without feeling out of control. The other good news is that plenty of folks are already leaning into this work and there are plenty of lessons we can draw about how to do it well. We offer some starting points here:

- **Own it.** We can begin by reflecting and having honest discussions about power to diagnose the way our internal structures, cultures, behaviours, procedures and narratives, as well as the external systems, could be preventing change, or even contributing to harm. We might be part of the problem. That's going to be uncomfortable, and if you don't know where to begin, Platform C has a Power Audit exercise and the Shared Power Principle offers some questions to shape these conversations.

- **Trust and invest in people, not process.** We know that direct delivery staff have a very tough job – we don't need to make it harder through introducing more rules and bureaucracy. The Liberated Method and Human Learning Systems are two successful frameworks that have shown impressive results in how freeing people up and investing in capability can help build trust and deliver better outcomes.

- **Reimagine accountability.** Money is power, right? That's why we spend half of our time writing reports to convince funders that we're doing a great job – meanwhile the people we're truly accountable to (clients, families, communities) get what they get. Youth-led Accountable Futures Collective is trying to flip this by working with organisations to reimagine what accountability to young people can look like in practice. Just imagine if we could redefine accountability as ethical and relational, and not merely procedural.

- **Recognise rights.** Being heard and feeling agency is a right, not a privilege. 54 reasons, in partnership with SNAICC, The Australian National University, University of Melbourne, and Western Sydney University have established The Centre for Child Rights, which seeks to help challenge the status quo and transform it through a child rights lens.

- **Bring others all the way in.** Many NGOs are exploring how we can empower and listen to different cohorts through advisory groups and other mechanisms within our organisations. The Foyer Foundation are taking the commitment further by working to bring young people with lived experience onto their Board.

- **Measure what matters and learn together.** Reporting, monitoring and evaluation has huge potential for change. Human Learning Systems encourages us to rethink the use of data in evaluation, to stop managing metrics (which just leads to wasting time and gaming the system), and start using data to learn and improve on real outcomes.

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