On the Challenge of Creating a Sustained Force for Collaboration

There has been much attention focused on the increased value that could come from improved collaboration among “stove-piped” government organizations. Much of this attention has been generated by getting out from behind the bureaucratic machinery and the counters over which government officials peer at the citizens they ostensibly serve; essentially to view government operations from the demand side (where the value is created) rather than from the supply side (where the costs are incurred, accounted for and controlled)

Two different views of the demand side: individuals with wants needs and rights, also with obligations the individuals that look a lot like customers in the commercial sector (except for the fact that they do not always get benefits from government, and when they do, they do not usually pay the full price of the benefit they receive.)

A different kind of demand is generated by the aggregate individual and social conditions in which individuals are living, and make a claim on our individual and collective conscience for some kind of collective response to improve those conditions. This sort of demand simply hangs out there as a value that could be produced if only some method of mobilizing financial, economic, social and political resources could be found.

Some of that demand finds its financier, producer and supplier in the voluntary actions of individuals or voluntary sector organization. And that flow of voluntary effort creates a supply of activity and effort that can begin to change the individual and social conditions to a larger or smaller degree.

But another part of the demand – the aggregate wants, needs, rights (along with the fair enforcement of our obligations to one another) is activated through public policy choices in which a collective decision is made to tax and regulate the body politic to advance purposes that the collective deems good and just for the society as a whole. It is that decision that funnels money into government coffers and out to those charged with satisfying the wants, meeting the needs, vindicating the rights, and imposing the duties of citizens.

When we take this point of view seriously, and look back at government, and its efforts to act independently and in association with other large resource holding and producing agents of the society, that we find much to be desired from the point of view of the demanders of government services and enforcement activities.

From the point of the individuals engaged with transactions with government we see an inattention to the user perspective. Unresponsive, tangled, etc.

From the point of view of success in dealing with effective social problems, we the same problem of tangle – particularly when problems cut sectors of society, across levels of government the missions and the operations of government agencies.

These simple operations have led to a trenchant criticism of government, and an idea about how to improve: the goal has been to find better ways to co-ordinate by tapping into the resources of all sectors and agencies, and combining them in ways that are more convenient for individual clients and more effective in dealing with large problems.

It is important to note that the core idea here is co-ordination as it is manifested at different levels of social action and learning.

Individual level co-ordination – the micro

Higher level co-ordination to ensure that all the capacities that are needed at the coal face of individual contacts of some kind are conveniently available for use.

If only we could get better co-ordination we could achieve a good society at less cost.

It is a compelling image, but one has to begin thinking a bit harder about whether the idea of co-ordination can measure up to this challenge, and if so, what would be necessary to cataylze or unleash the benefits of collaboration.

At the outset, one could think that our ability to achieve goals with respect either to individuals with different kinds of problems, or to societies with different kinds of problems might depend on some things other than co-ordination. It might turn out that we simply did not have a method of improving conditions no matter how much we tried. It might turn out that we have methods, but nowhere near the scale of financing and effort to make a difference. It might turn out that our approach has gaps that frustrate the effectiveness of our efforts, Or, and this is the core idea I think that somehow our ability to co-ordinate efforts to ensure that the right interventions are available at the right level in the right distribution for the right population at the right time for them is not up to the task, and it is this co-ordinaton capacity that makes the key difference.

Note that co-ordination is a kind of capacity that exists at many different levels. And it seems likely that in order to have the capacity to do the necessary work at the individual level requires not only considerable capacity at that level in terms of monitoring, fitting to case, fitting to time, dealing with unexpected changes, etc. but also in terms of the larger systems that can move the capacities into close enough reach to meet the demands for real time co-ordination. It will be difficult to operate with a lean inventory and no slack in a world that demands a high degree of flexibility to meet the operational demands of co-ordination. This, alone, should cause us to think about whether the problem we are considering whether it be micro or macro is really a problem of co-ordination (which sounds cheap but might not be), or is really a problem of good technology, scale, and scope at each level of the supply system that is being reviewed and is the object of approval.

But let’s assume that the problem we face is one of co-ordination, and that co-ordination is required and will create value at both the micro and macro levels – in the routine handling of cases within organizations, and the less than routine handling of cases across organizations. (Mix of products, or mixed products as the necessary approach to a particular problem)

The next question becomes how, and by whom, should such a complex but well-ordinated system be managed.

By definition, it seems that the problem has to be seen at both the micor and macro level. It also seems important that those trying to manage the system have some line of sight into the quality of the co-ordination and what is being done and needed all up and down the system. This suggests that a key first step would be analysis and the development of information systems that could descsribe and monitor the operations of the system – even before we get to outcomes. Serious problems here with respect to privacy and procurement of information systems. Might not be technical limitations, but other kinds – our ability to monitor and come to understand current operations of a larger system which no one can currently quite see, evaluate, manage or improve.

But, one could argue, even before we make this big investment in infrastructure, we have to persuade ourselves that the problem we want to address at the macro level (through much improved co-ordination among micro peocesses) is one worth solving, and that the best way to solve it is through improved co-ordination. One could get stuck here for a long time, but let’s imagine that someone works their way through this, and in doing so, becomes a valuable person or team for anyone who wants to go farther.

We have seen that the problem we want to solve cuts across structures in complex ways. This is in many ways the problem and it came from yesterday’s and today’s solution! It is tempting to think that the structural problem needs a structural solution: we need to create a kind of czar that can see the problem as a whole above the level of organizations, levels and sectors, and act on it with confident knowledge and dictatorial problem. But that essentially simply creates a new (probably larger) organization from bits and pieces of other organizations. We have lots of experience in government trying to come up with good structural solutions to structural problems, and have often found that it is much more expensive and less effective than one would like to believe.

It is for that reason that we often look to something less than a structural re-organization to get improved production out of a system that turns out not to be particularly well structured for the current problem (that has just become or new, or our broader, or simply our different focus). We think in terms of task forces, or project groups.

The difficulty is that we want a real executive capacity that can be focused, endure, and find and exploit opportunities for improved co-ordination (that by definition require existing big strong organizations to adapt their operations in some ways to the new requirements – resource allocations, information systems, performance measurement systems, client bases, etc.), but without creating a new organization.

If we wanted to be sure that we had enough operational authority in the room to get the required co-ordination, we would need the chief executives of all the organizations who had stakes or capacities or authorizations that were important to the co-oridinate effort (as best we could envision those requirements at the outset). But, that alone would not be enough. They would have to be held together in a deliberation and agreements to act in the best intrests of the collaboration and its purposes rather than their own. It might be very hard to assemble the group of principals in a group like that. On the other hand, that group might be important to convene intermittently (like a legislature!) to give political weight and operatonal authority to the work being done by parts of their organizations as members of the collaborative effort.

A simple way to visualize the problem. There is the problem that the collaboration is supposed to solve. It has different dimensions (more or less important to different participants in the collaboration). It requires resources new or re-deployed that have to come from new or reallocated activity. It has to be able to act to produce the desired results.

This is the envisioned potential. But that has to be compared with the status quo, and one has to imagine how the various elements needed for the vision could be mobilized, created and designed. What would be the characteristics of a team or group that could do this.?