Providing Fast Flowing Calm Waters. The role of the Design Manager in mid-large scale Public Sector Co-Design Projects

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Abstract: Co-Design is very challenging in a public sector context yet the role of Design Management in this field is seldom touched on in literature. Using an action research approach we present 3 case studies of mid-large scale of co-design projects. Focussing on how the challenge of activating citizens and managing complex multi stakeholder projects were addressed through a Design Manager role. We explore the evolving role of the Design Manager, and the skills and human qualities required for them to work across strategic, management and operational strands in complex, collaborative projects. From this we present a model of Design Management for managing community-led co-design projects to create calm waters for co-design. The contribution of a model of Design Management for co-design in the public sector can be applied to the facilitation of any co-design project. In conclusion we make 3 key insights and recommendations in relation to the model.

Keywords: Activating citizens, design manager, co-design, public sector engagement

1. Introduction

Co-Design is increasingly being used to enable more productive exchanges between the public sector and the communities they represent. However this is not a straightforward process, in this paper we articulate a model of Design Management that describes this approach. This model is applied through 3 case studies of public sector co-design projects of differing scales.

In this section the benefits of co-design in the public sector are explored and how Design Management has evolved to facilitate these complex, collaborative design processes. The necessary mind-set and skills for Design Managers in the field of co-design are introduced, along with the concept of the “Anti Hero”. A non-traditional leader possessing the human qualities required for successful delivery of co-design projects that inspire collective ownership of outcomes.
1.1. Co-Design in the Public Sector

Co-design is a well-known approach to responding to complex societal issues where no one single viewpoint or sector expertise holds the answer. Increasingly used to transform public and social services a true co-design process involves non-designers in every stage of the design process (Sanders and Stappers, 2008, Burns, Cottam, Vanstone and Winhall, 2006). Co-design is very challenging in a public sector context with deeply ingrained disciplinary positions, a culture of high-pressure low reward and in the UK an on-going agenda of austerity. Having said this co-design can have significant benefits, activating public sector professionals as well as citizens, helping them to innovate together and strive for the best possible contribution in a co-design process (Sanches, M.G., & Frankel, L. 2010, Cruickshank, 2014, Botero, A., & Saad-sulonenm, 2008). In some instances these initiatives are effective at a small scale, working with 10’s of people in total. Larger projects working overall with hundreds or thousands of participants presents a different set of challenges. (Cruickshank, Coupe and Hennessy, 2013). The emerging role of the Design Manager in facilitating mid to large-scale co-design projects in the larger context of public sector engagement for social innovation is seldom touched on in literature. This includes the skills and human qualities required for the Design Manager to work across strategic, management and operational levels in complex, collaborative projects.

1.2. Evolving role of the Design Manager

Design Management has focused on managing commercial design processes. In contrast, managing a co-design process involves facilitating the involvement of a diverse range of stakeholders and communities in every stage of a design process. The complexity of managing and balancing different people’s interests in co-design, and the diminished control stakeholders have over the project means co-design is not without costs and risks (Steen, Manschot and De Koning, 2011 &). To offset this, co-design aims to “generate more value” than a traditional design process as those involved generate a shared understanding and ownership of final outcomes (Payne, Storbacka and Frow, 2008, & Kleinsmann and Valkburg, 2008).

Managing a co-design process so participants can exchange ideas and opinions in a safe space that inspires innovation requires weeks and sometimes months of planning and trust building between collaborators. In complex collaborations conflict management can also be required (Bryson, Crosby and Middleton Stone, 2006 and Roser and Samson, 2009). The time consuming, challenging task of setting up and facilitating a co-design process often goes unnoticed yet creates the critical “scaffold” for co-design to take place (Roser and Samson, 2009 & Sanders, 2002). Roser and Samson (2009) write that facilitating co-design calls for new management skills and styles. Cooper, Junginer and Lockwood also propose that the role of the Design Manager is required to evolve to manage co-design processes:

“The challenge for Design Management in co-design is to manage a process of open and distributed design decision making. The Design Manager is critically the manager of the interfaces with the wider community of co-designers”. (Cooper, Junginer and Lockwood, 2011)

Obtaining buy in from key stakeholders and public sector policy makers that the issue in question can be opened up to co-design is a fundamental requirement if a project to have any impact. This includes formal and informal meetings to build trust and agree how project and co-design activities will be managed and organised. Aligning the benefits of co-design activities to the goals and associated benefits for stakeholders and participants is important at this early stage. This can go a long way in helping to avoid collaboration and communication problems within multidisciplinary teams, and ensure that intended benefits are realised. (Steen, Manschot and De Koning, 2011,
Kleinsmann and Valkburg, 2008, Bryson, Crosby and Middleton Stone, 2006). During this pre co-design phase trust and “courage” (Cooper & al., 2011) along with a willingness to let go of any attachment to the outcomes of the design process is required.

1.3. Decision making managers versus having an open mind

Using a co-design approach to respond to complex societal issues or transform public services is not for the faint hearted or the risk averse. Traditionally it is the manager with their decision-making mind-set who frames the design problem and in doing so “limits the possibilities” (Cooper & al., 2011). In contrast, co-design requires stakeholders to trust the capabilities of participants in framing the problem at the start of a co-design process. Often what can emerge in the first co-design workshop is that the problem is not what it was initially thought to be (Steen et al., 2011). The focus of the project can change in the problem definition phase or indeed at any point in the co-design process. It is the responsibility of the Design Manager to constantly map co-design activities to the overall vision of the project to keep the project on course (Cruickshank et al., 2013).

1.4. Managing projects with uncertain outcomes

The nature of collaborative design processes involve dealing with uncertain outcomes (Moellenkamp, et. al., 2010). During co-design participants are supported to respond to complex, interconnected issues using their expertise “of their own experience” (Sanders and SonicRim, 2001). Information and ideas generated by participants are analysed to develop key themes and uncover contradictions and tensions in the data. By supporting participants to hold differing viewpoints, opinions and contradictions in tension the opportunity for new and innovative solutions emerge. In doing so:

“Design Management has become a richer process of transformation. Not an either /or scenario but a set of contradictions and tensions that will be resolved through active engagement around these issues”. (Cooper et al., 2011).

This approach to Design Management of co-design turns a traditional Prince 2 project management approach upside down. It necessitates the Design Manager be comfortable managing projects with uncertain outcomes. Seeing themselves as the facilitators of the co-design process, rather than steering participants to any predefined or preferred solution.

1.5. Concept of the “Anti hero” and its relevance to co-design

A Design Manager facilitating an open co-design process requires skills and qualities very different from a traditional egotistical, heroic management style. Qualities suited to the successful Design Management of public sector co-design projects are explored in detail in Richard Wilson’s paper on the concept of the modern day “Anti Hero” (Wilson, 2013). Wilson proposes that responding to today’s complex “wicked problems” requires a different style of leadership. The literature on wicked problems is well developed, describing challenges that are inherently resistant to clear definition or a clear end point of solution (Snodgrass, A., & Coyne, R. (1997), Buchanan. (1998), Coyne, R. (2005). This inherent ambiguity has implication for leading projects in the wicked problem space. It requires leadership that is not about imposing top down solutions to problems, rather enabling a process where everybody involved participates by contributing and combining elements of their different perspectives and experience. Anti hero leaders have the following qualities, “empathy, humility, self awareness, flexibility and the ability to acknowledge uncertainty”. (Wilson, 2013). They must be flexible and open to different solutions coming from different sources and willing to build strong, diverse teams.
2. Approach

The research methods used in the case study’s described here are very much in sympathy with the notion of anti-hero leadership. The case studies describe activity that adopts an action research methodology. This approach has distinct advantages for creative engagement projects (Stringer, E. 2013, Swan 2002). The creative exchanges and co-design central to the research questions fits well into the cycle of plan/act/observe/reflect that characterises this methodology. In addition to this the dual outcomes of action research projects (practical and academic or knowledge based) enable participants to gain a tangible benefit from their work in the project while at the same time enabling purely academic research outputs. While action research is the research method that underpins the case studies presented here, this paper focuses on the role of the design manager in facilitating the smooth progress of these projects rather than the research methods that underpin these projects.

3. Model for Design Management applied to Action Research

This section describes a model for managing community-led co-design projects of mid-large scale with the public sector (Figure. 1). This model has been applied and tested through participatory Action Research cycles in over 10 co-design projects. For co-design to be effectively set up and facilitated to a successful conclusion the Design Manager role consistently weaves across 3 strands encompassing:

1. Strategic
2. Leadership and Management
3. Operational

![Figure 1. A model for Design Management applied to Action Research cycles which consistently weave across 3 strands.](image-url)
1. STRATEGIC

Distinct from both project manager and creative designer, the Design Manager forms the strategic partnerships, relationships, networks, connections and conditions for co-design. Time and consideration are taken to build trust and a shared understanding of each partner’s aims and objectives. In this strand a project plan is developed which sets out aims and objectives, partner obligations (including any financial or in-kind contributions) and project timescales. Agreeing what is to be delivered at the end of co-design activities can help to reassure risk averse stakeholders that co-design will result in relevant, tangible outcomes. It also serves to manage expectations as to what will be delivered at the end of the co-design activity. This phase frames the project, creating calm waters for the design team and co-design participants to be innovative in co-design activities. This gives the project the best chance of having a measurable impact that benefits all involved. In parallel, the Design Manager is also involved in in strategically improving research outcomes as well as project outcomes.

2. LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT

Once the scope of the project and deliverables are agreed the Design Manager leads a team of designers, facilitators /researchers to design and deliver a programme of co-design activities. The design team are given as much autonomy as possible to design and deliver creative, engaging activities. The Design Manager focuses on managing the overall process and maintaining clear lines of communication through all 3 strands. Regular updates on the co-design process are given to partners and stakeholders. Design Managers need to be aware of any issues or changes in direction of the project, resolve any conflicts and respond to issues as they arise. Any changes in a partner’s political or organisational context that affect the co-design process may need to be communicated to the co-design team. The Design Manager monitors scope creep and whether the project is on track to meet overall aims and deliverables by the agreed timescale. They also set and keep track of budgets and ensure project funders are reported too.

3. OPERATIONAL

Any project or event that brings people together involves invisible, time consuming work to ensure participants have an enjoyable experience and everything runs smoothly. The Design Manager (depending on the size of the design team) can also be responsible for or have oversight of detailed focussed tasks such as: booking venues and catering, co-ordinating logistics and transport, ordering materials, procuring services and paying invoices. For a high profile project the Design Manager would devise a marketing, press and social media strategy and respond to individual enquiries about the project from the public. They would also play a part in recruiting participants, marketing events, recruiting and managing volunteers. To ensure a constant flow of communication the Design Manager organises regular team meetings and debriefs for the design team, meetings with project partners, and attends any relevant boards or networks to represent the project to help ensure a legacy once the co-design is complete.

4. Case studies

In this section we describe 3 case studies of co-design projects of varying scale. The case studies focus on the Design Manager’s role across strategic, leadership and management and operational strands. The first of these projects was an EU INTERREG funded project with a remit to transform public space through co-design called PROUD (People, Organisations, Researchers Using Design). In
this paper we will be focussing on one of these projects called Beyond the Castle. This project involved the collaboration of 2,000 participants with the active co-design involvement of 600 of these in reimagining a key urban green space in the city centre of Lancaster in the North of England.

The second 2 case studies draw from a large co-design project called Leapfrog. The remit of this project is to transform public sector engagement through design; in essence co-designing tools to help communities and public sector partners have a stronger, and more productive and energised dialogue. The Neighbourhood Centres project is a collaboration with Lancashire County Council to co-designing tools and resources to enable the best possible transition from libraries to multi-use centres in Lancashire. The Derbyshire Matrix project was co-designed tool to support local authorities and other key stakeholders in their statutory responsibility to safeguard vulnerable adults.

4.1. Case study 1: Beyond the Castle

Beyond the Castle was a high profile large-scale co-design project, which involved the management of multiple public sector partners, community groups and 5 professional designers. A high-profile green space in the centre of Lancaster next to Lancaster’s historic castle, English Heritage were pressing the City Council to improve the site due to tree roots damaging valuable archaeological Roman remains below the ground. Opinions were divided as to what to do with the site and the appropriate level of ambition. A key concern was balancing the needs of local communities who enjoy the peaceful, unspoilt site and those who felt the Roman remains should be exploited for tourism. The Beyond the Castle co-design project aimed to result in ideas and a vision for how the site could be enhanced.

Strategic

A 6-month period of formal and informal meetings to build trust and scope the project with City and County Councils took place. Officers were understandably nervous about the risks of involving the general public in an open co-design process. Through understanding their concerns the benefits of a co-design approach to address concerns were conveyed. For example, co-design would aim to generate community values and collective ownership of a vision for the space - as opposed to a divided community. A workshop for key stakeholders took place before the co-design process began. This aimed to obtain political buy in and be a confidential space to speak about their ambitions or concerns for the project.

Leadership & Management

Building strategic relationships ran alongside the procurement and training of a team of 5 professional designers who would lead the co-design challenge. Their brief was to design a series of co-design activities to enable non-designers to contribute to the design process. Their plan for large public events led to the recruitment of 20 community volunteers. Through giving volunteers CV worthy opportunities, a core group played a large part in realising the projects ambitions.

Operational

The behind the scenes task of co-ordinating the meetings, networks, events, logistics, reporting, finance, marketing and communication of the Beyond the Castle project was enormous (Figure 2). Once the co-design process started the events came thick and fast. The 4-event was a Visioning
Workshop. Here community volunteers analysed the data from all co-design activities to date and developed a key set of Values for the space. The outcomes of the Visioning Workshop formed the basis of the final ‘interactive co-design exhibition’. The schedule left 2 weeks to design and build an innovative exhibition, built by and manned by volunteers for 2 weeks with a high profile launch event, all overseen by the Design Manager.

**Conclusion**

The outcomes of the co-design exhibition created the final handover report (Cruickshank, L. & Coupe, G., 2013). This documented the entire co-design process and made recommendations for the next stage of the engagement process. Beyond the Castle succeeded in obtaining political buy in to remove barriers to impact, created still waters for co-design and gradually instilled collective ownership of outcomes through the Design manager working across multiple strands for 12 months. Throughout the process the Design Manager managed the teams and volunteers and communicated regular co-design project updates to stakeholders, constantly mapping the vision of the designers to the overall aims of the project.

![Figure 2. Photos show the high profile Beyond the Castle co-design challenge which involved a series of open co-design events in public spaces. The behind the scenes task of co-ordinating the co-design project was huge and involved co-ordinating a large team of volunteers. The Photo on the right shows the ‘interactive co-design exhibition’ which was designed and launched in 2 weeks.](image)

4.2. Case study 2: Neighbourhood Centres

Neighbourhood Centres is a mid-scale Leapfrog collaboration with Lancashire County Council. As part of £150m of cuts needed to be made by 2020 the local authority are closing 35 libraries (out of 74) alongside some children’s centres which provide many services to help with parenting. The decision was made to create a network of 39 Neighbourhood Centres and libraries to deliver services in a different way by co-locating them in the same building. The collaboration with Leapfrog aims to co-design the transition from libraries to multi-use centres in Lancashire, developing a series of tools and approaches that can be used to enable the best possible transition from libraries to multi-stakeholder neighbourhood centres (Figure 3).

**Strategic**

Impressed by the Head of Libraries, Museums, Culture & Registrars unfailing positivity and ability to see the opportunity for transformation, the Design Manager set up a series of meetings with the council’s leadership team who were working under great pressure in the middle of a high profile public consultation over the future of the libraries. Several meetings felt more like therapy sessions as Senior Managers talked for hours about the unprecedented situation they were managing. Shared objectives, deliverables and timescales were agreed for the co-design project.
Leadership & Management

A major objective for both Leapfrog and the council was that involving a select team of staff in the process of co-design during turbulent times would empower and motivate the staff, 400 of whom were facing being interviewed for their roles in a major restructure. Despite the project taking place in a time of job instability and organisational uncertainty, taking the time to scope the project through listening to employees helped them to feel heard, valued and remain committed to the co-design process. Regular project updates both to Senior Management and the co-design team were important to show progress and maintain momentum.

Operational

The Design Manager organised a scoping event followed by 3 co-design workshops to be held at libraries across the county. The Leapfrog Research Associate focussed on the design of materials, tools and event facilitation. Despite the Leapfrog team having to adapt the co-design schedule and extend timescales a core group remained committed and engaged with the process. The Research Associate co-ordinated and led small co-design sessions to successfully produce the final tools and resources.

Conclusion

Throughout the project the Design Manager maintained clear lines of communication with Senior Management about the progress of the public consultation and transition to Neighbourhood Centres. During this time the context of the project changed several times due to organisational and political turbulence. This new realities needed communicating to the co-design team and activities and timescales reshaped to match by the Design Manager. The project has helped to prepare employees for the transition to libraries by instilling resilience and a desire to works across teams.

4.3. Case study 3: Derbyshire Matrix

Derbyshire Matrix was a mid-scale Leapfrog collaboration with Derbyshire County Council. Local authorities hold the statutory responsibility for safeguarding (protecting people from any form of abuse in relation to the public sector). Derbyshire County Council are increasingly seeking out innovative methods, approaches and protocols to enable improved decision-making and effectiveness of their Safeguarding. Derbyshire County Council had a particularly challenging time during 2015 in this area and committed to finding new ways of engaging partners in addressing this challenge. The aim of the Leapfrog collaboration was to produce a new tool to guide interactions between multiple-agencies and support decision making for the safeguarding of vulnerable adults.
Strategic
Leapfrog ran this project in partnership with professional facilitator Dee Hennessy who had previously established contacts within Derbyshire Council. This meant that the usual time the Design Manager and Leapfrog team would spend building trust and forming a partnership was greatly reduced as Dee led this process through her contacts. This also meant that the need and problem definition for the co-design project was a long way towards being formed when it was brought for consideration to Leapfrog.

Leadership & Management
Once the project was scoped and a brief developed the Design Manager supported the team to work autonomously, keeping oversight of deadlines and deliverables at team meetings. Having a professional facilitator involved in co-design projects was immensely valuable. Dee Hennessy was already comfortable collaborating with the Leapfrog researchers and together they facilitated a co-design workshop in just one day, wrangling diverse opinions and perspectives to collective consensus by the end of the day (Figure 4).

Operational
As this was a short project with just one full day co-design workshop, the Design Manager’s operational role in this project was light touch involving booking rooms and catering. The tool ideas by the end of the workshop were developed enough for the Leapfrog Research Associate to refine into prototypes and manage the process of obtaining feedback from participants to inform final designs. Inviting the participants from multiple agencies to the workshop was managed by a contact at Derbyshire Matrix, as was organising the final launch event for the safeguarding tool.

Conclusion
It can be very challenging to co-design good outcomes in just one session. This short project shows that were there is a project champion with established relationships and an emerging focus for the project it is possible to co-design in just one day long workshop. Due to these factors and trust in the team the role of the Design Manager could afford to be light touch across all strands. Critical to this success was that when the group arrived on the day they were primed and ready to co-design when supported by a mix of emphatic and instrumental professional facilitation.

Figure 4. Professional facilitator Dee Hennessy supports the group to co-design solutions with a shared consensus in just one day.
5. CONCLUSION

The role of the Design Manager in mid-large scale public sector co-design projects is invaluable in setting up and facilitating projects to create calm waters for co-design which result in measurable impact and collective ownership of outcomes. The contribution of a model of Design Management for co-design can be applied to the facilitation of any co-design project. In conclusion we make 3 key insights and recommendations in relation to the model:

1. Investing time to develop partnerships, establish trust, identify shared benefits and design co-design activities to realise these benefits is a valuable investment from all partners at the start of a co-design process. For large projects this process of trust and relationship building can take twice as long as the actual co-design phase. Documenting co-design projects and agreeing deliverables such as a handover report are can help to ensure the project has a lasting legacy.

2. Design Managers of co-design are required to be comfortable managing projects with uncertain outcomes. They must also be able to resist becoming attached to any particular outcomes. This requires a certain mind-set, skills and human qualities. Design Managers of co-design are unusual in that they play both a key foreground strategic role and also a background role that is operational and detail focussed. They are a facilitator of the project, not the face of the project as that must be the participant’s space to own. The Design Manager’s role requires them to trust the intelligence of participants to create the solution/s that is right for them. They facilitate a process that deliberately creates the space for others to step into in order for them to take ownership of outcomes.

3. The task of managing and co-ordinating co-design and the necessary communication across all 3 strands is time consuming and often hidden, unnoticed work compared to the impact a high profile project can have. The Design Manager must be comfortable not working for the reward of public recognition. Managing co-design requires the Design Manager to be flexible and adaptable to changing situations. Managing multiple co-design processes in parallel is very challenging as change in direction or timescales of one project can affect others running at the same time.

Recommendation for future research

As the benefits of co-design can be of such value to the project and participants and co-design can be a lengthy and costly process, preparing the ground so people are ready to co-design when they arrive at a workshop is an area that deserves research attention. How to achieve ‘co-design readiness’ is an area for recommended future research. As the Derbyshire Matrix case study illustrates, successful outcomes can be achieved in just one session when people are well briefed and the project scope is tightly focussed.
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