

The challenge of co-production when we can't be trusted to vote for anything!

Having worked in the social sector as a consultant, trainer and coach over the last decade I've built a reputation as a vocal champion of co-production. Simply talking about co-production raises the first challenge which is that I very often meet blank faces when discussing it because there doesn't seem to be a definitive definition of what it is.

I don't intend to use this space to go deep on definitions so I will briefly describe what I mean when I talk about co-production. I am talking about professionals, and those whose decisions affect them, working equally together to make decisions and create services that benefit everyone. The belief is that organisations can become agents of change, rather than just service providers, when they utilise the lived experience of users, and value them as an asset. People who use services are involved in all aspects of a service – the planning, development and actual delivery of the service.

Transformational co-production requires a shift in the balance of power from the establishment to the people. For the purposes of simplicity, let's use 'the establishment' to describe professionals, experts, policy makers and decision makers; and 'the people' to be service users, customers and the wider public.

Many would agree that this makes a lot of sense in principle. It describes a respectful and empowering way for organisations to design and deliver services. But what happens when the people take up the invitation to be active agents of change and it is out of sync with the establishment view?

I read the following tweet the week Honey G and Ed Balls made it through to the next round of X Factor and Strictly Come Dancing respectively and it made me smile.

'Brexit, Ed Balls, Boaty McBoatface and Honey G. All proof that we can't be trusted to vote for anything!'

The following day I woke up to the news that Donald Trump was to be the next president of the USA and that wiped the smile right off my face!

In looking again at this tweet, it seems to raise several issues relating to the idea of transformational co-production. The tweeter implies that we, the people, have not got the sense we were born with, and if true then why would the establishment want to release some of its power to the people?

Let's look at the challenge posed by the first event in the tweet. In 2007 (pre-Brexit) David Cameron said:

'The public become, not the passive recipients of state services, but the active agents of their own life. They are trusted to make the right choices for themselves and their families. They become doers, not the done-for.'

David Cameron 'trusted' the people to make the right choices for 'themselves and their families', so he gave them the power. The 'right choice' of the people was not what he or many of the establishment considered 'the right choice'. The result for the country is subjective, but the result for him personally was deeply damaging.

Herein lies one of the challenges of co-production in practice: you shift the power, you allow people to be 'active agents' and your job is potentially on the line. Who wants to put themselves out of a job in these times of austerity? The potential reality is that leaders and professionals may find themselves on what they believe to be the wrong end of a decision. The establishment believe they know best, and have been able to make decisions based on what they believe to be best, without what might be perceived as interference, so why would they welcome the power shift? Co-production will likely go down like a lead balloon in some quarters, privately, if not publicly.

Honey G is one of the most controversial X Factor contestants in its history. Many fans were appalled by Sharon Osbourne's decision to select Honey G, with more than 10,000 signing a petition for her to be replaced. Honey G holds herself in high regard and seems not to care what others think.

Sound familiar? Change Honey G for Donald Trump, and Sharon Osbourne with the Republican Party, and it wouldn't sound too dissimilar. No one would have seen it coming at the X Factor audition stage, but Honey G stood a real chance of winning. Just as few believed Trump stood a chance at the start of proceedings, yet he is now president.

The challenge is that when you allow the people to be 'doers' you might not like what they do. The probability is that they do what they do having felt being 'done-for' for too long. Arguably, if transformational co-production had been practiced previously there would be less of a divide between the establishment and the people and a greater understanding of both parties would likely be agreed.

Take the tweeters' third example: according to a source at the BBC, Ed Balls and partner Katya, were polling ahead of the other contestants. The former politician's dodgy Dad-dancing has seen the expert panel regularly vote him in the bottom, with him only to be saved week after week by the public vote. A protest vote? Proof that sometimes the people just don't behave as you'd expect.

The people are sick of 'business as usual'. They are tired of experts and the policy makers being the only ones with the power to make decisions. The irony is that, in this example, the person the people are backing was not so long ago very much part of the establishment - proving that it is possible for the establishment to connect with people. I concede that this specific, reality TV example may be pushing the realms of credibility. However, on a serious note, I do believe that shifting the power balance is possible.

In 2014, the National Environment Research Council (NERC) announced the construction of a £200 million polar research ship and asked people to vote online to

name the ship. Boaty McBoatface was so popular with the people that the Web page for voting crashed several times and the name topped the poll. Yet the organisation announced that the new research vessel will be named after renowned naturalist Sir David Attenborough. The NERC said it recognised the popularity of Boaty McBoatface, and said it will use the name for one of the ship's remote-controlled submersibles.

NERC's website, the same site that crashed from traffic voting for Boaty McBoatface, stated that, 'The final name will be selected by NERC'!

Here is an all too familiar example of consultation. We value you and will consult with you but if your input is not as we wish it we will revert to what we thought was best all along. To appease you, by means of a patronising gesture, we will use your idea on a vessel that will operate out of sight and be remote-controlled i.e. operated at arm's length. I am starting to feel my Ed Balls example had more credibility than this invitation to vote!

The process was latterly described as 'naïveté', describing a lack of experience, wisdom, or judgement. An interesting turn of phrase. I'd use disingenuous, or lacking sincerity.

I make an important distinction between co-production and participation.

Participation, or involvement, is about consultation and co-production means being equal partners and actively involved in design and delivery. I am often championing the 'taking it further than participation' bit as I believe those with lived experience are key to designing and delivering meaningful services that have the capacity to extend reach, improve engagement and add significant value - resulting in creating social change. But so often what starts off as co-production turns into participation as the establishment are not prepared to take the risk and resort to their get out clause in the small print. Incidents like this damage credibility. My advice would be: don't pay lip service to co-production, or even to participation. In the social sector this has the potential to be hugely damaging. It puts off those with lived experience sharing their valuable wisdom, prevents the most effective service being designed, and potentially turning those in need away entirely.

I once ran a co-production workshop for Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) and the users of the health services they commissioned. The scepticism on both sides was palpable. Both sides understood what co-production was and the users, who were the most engaged and vocal, requested the word wasn't used - likening it to a swear word!

Both parties were jaded with the notion of co-production. Not because they didn't believe in it, but because they had too many experiences of it being treated as a tick box exercise and not implemented sincerely. The users sat on one table and mostly got involved, while the professionals sat at another table and checked their phones.

The learning of the day was very much: don't bother without genuine commitment. My recommendation is: do bother, but do it properly. By way of suggestions I recommend:

1. Awareness

Share with all concerned the thinking behind the decision to take a co-production approach. Don't over-complicate it, not least as the principle is not complicated, and communicate the benefits, limitations and expectations. By doing this you are already demonstrating transparency which is a key factor to the success of this approach.

2. Buy-in

For this to work it needs buy-in from both parties. This may not be immediately forthcoming depending on individuals, organisational culture, previous experience etc. Remember the users who likened 'co-production' to a swear word and the disengaged professionals busy on Facebook? Gaining genuine buy-in is not necessarily easy for some of the reasons I have already stated. If done well, however, buy-in will lead to genuine enthusiasm and commitment, which is essential to the process working. Patience is required at the start to achieve commitment. I've found it useful to recognise likely champions of the process and give them a starring role to share their thinking and commitment to the process. The more varied voices saying positive things the better. Values are at the heart of this wherever on the 'buy in scale' people are. Facilitate the opportunity to discuss what really matters to those involved and it is very likely there is huge common ground.

3. Expectations

Both parties need an understanding of expectations, and knowledge about what that means in reality. That is to include what is expected of them to make the required changes to behaviours, working practices, and decision making methods. Take into account that working in this way often provides an insight into challenges both parties face which might not previously have been fully understood. I have found that when users have a better understanding of the difficult decisions professionals are faced with they provide more considered contributions which prevents the process turning into an unviable wish list.

4. Performance

In order for this to work effectively in practice all those involved need to have the required skills to deliver. Be aware that this may well mean investing in training or coaching for people, for them to be in a position to deliver on expectations. This is particularly pertinent to those in the social sector as users of our services have not always had the privilege of education and opportunities. Training and guidance might be required to enhance their ability to best share their lived experience. Equally, professionals may benefit from guidance on engagement.

5. Feedback

Giving regular feedback is important to meet people where they are at, and to bring both parties with you. By this stage, we shouldn't be talking about 'both parties', as an equal, working partnership will be in place. All those involved will be informed about the current situation, the objective, the barriers and the likely outcome. Co-production does not equal harmony because difficult conversations will still be had, disagreements will still occur, and desired outcomes might not be reached. The greatest benefit from getting this approach right is that when negatives occur you will

much more likely keep people on-side. The people will understand better the rationale of an outcome having lived through it and contributed to it, and the establishment will have community champions on-side ready to communicate to their peers and the media in a way which even the best communications team in the best organisation will struggle to equal. Also, include recognition and reward as part of your feedback activities.

Transformational co-production will struggle without all those elements. My strongest recommendation is to take time over points one and two. These can feel slow but avoid the temptation to rush as it will otherwise likely mean returning to these further down the line.

It takes courage and an investment of time and money to genuinely build transformational co-production into your new 'business as usual'. Many might not blame the persistently stretched social sector for feeling reluctant to take on the baton on this change, but I feel the sector is best placed to lead the way. I also feel that we can't afford not to adopt this. For too long it's been 'them and us' for too many and we've learned lately the consequences of 'them' feeling excluded and 'done-for'. Perhaps we can ensure greater equality of opportunity is a consequence of recent events?

Another tweet I read on the day of Trump's victory feels appropriate to conclude with as it seems to sum up some of what I've discussed.

'The shock you feel isn't because your country changed. It's because you just learned your understanding about your country was wrong.'

Your understanding about your users, customers, or indeed population, will be wrong if you haven't actively sought to genuinely understand them by working with them in partnership. When you value the contributions they bring and the value they can provide then your understanding will not be wrong, nor will you be shocked.

This provocation piece was developed as part of [Steph's](#) Clore Social Leadership Fellowship.

Steph provides training and coaching to encourage transformational coproduction within organisations. She can be contacted via www.making-lemonade.co.uk and on [Twitter](#).