The Peter Drucker Challenge: Continuity and Change

Our Failing Society: Social Work as a Knowledge Profession and the Privatization of Public Problem-Solving
By Eleanor Murphy

In an era of political, economic, environmental, technological and social upheaval, opportunities for innovation are all around us. As the challenges facing our society become more complex, and as the causal factors become increasingly interdependent, finding solutions requires radical and revolutionary changes to traditional ways of thinking. When the national press branded social work a "failing profession" in the aftermath of the Baby Peter case in 2008, what no-one considered was that perhaps the reality was a failing far worse. Perhaps social work is not a failing profession; perhaps ours is a failing society.

In the face of growing economic pressure, characterized by rising rates of unemployment, increasing benefit dependency and a growing number of households living in poverty, social problems thrive. Drug and alcohol abuse, domestic and intergenerational violence, and mental ill health have become features of the home environment for many British families, and increasingly the problems of the "family next door" are becoming problems owned by entire local communities. Crime and anti-social behaviour come hand-in-hand with poverty, gripping areas where unemployment is high and engagement in education low. In these areas, high proportions of young people enter the criminal justice system, while low proportions engage with education, training or employment. In these areas, life chances are stolen, not given.

Environments such as these are disabling, disempowering, and difficult to escape, creating mindsets that are negative, unmotivated, and potentially ignorant. In these social environments, parents do not instill in their children a belief in the right to safety, to education, to equal life chances. Why should they, if they do not believe in such rights themselves? Negative assumptions, negative attitudes, become engrained and are passed from generation to generation. And all the while, the British rich become richer. The conundrum of the capitalist society is this: when someone makes a profit, someone else somewhere else makes a loss.

So when a child is physically abused and neglected by their parent, and dies of that abuse, who failed that child? Was it the parent, who killed the child? Was it the professional, who failed to stop the parent killing the child? Or was it society, which perpetuated a cycle of poverty and inequality that created the conditions under which the parent was able to kill the child? Perhaps it was the money-hungry private sector workers, for keeping the rich rich and the poor poor? Perhaps it was the state, or the existing political and economic systems, which created the social problems leading to the abuse that killed the child? The finger of blame could be pointed at any one of these.

What is clear is that social change, and the resulting problems of a society in transition, presents perhaps the most important and most urgently needed opportunity for innovation today. In an environment where social structures are becoming both more complicated, with the growth of single parent and separated families, and increasingly diverse, with growing ethnic

and minority populations, the way we attempt to manage, monitor and support families through social change must be radically rethought.

The fundamental idea that management is a key function in modern society poses my next question: Can social change ever be managed? If to manage is to control, then no, social change can never be managed. Social change is a product of our times, it is the result of our changing environment, economy and population – it is the way we respond as human beings to what we experience around us. If our economy becomes weaker, the resulting social change may be embodied on the one hand by a growing ethos of "thrift" and of collective "hard work through hard times", echoed by a drive for re-skilling and seeking new forms of income generation. On the other hand, the resulting social change may be towards an ethos of worklessness and the acceptance of benefit dependency as the social norm.

Clearly, the former type of social change would be preferable to the latter, but can we "manage" this change in order to steer it in the preferred direction? For me, this is the role of modern social work: to attempt to manage and direct social change within communities. Branded a "failing" profession, with workers vilified in the press and national vacancy rates soaring, social work is far from a glamorous career choice. In most local authorities, staff stress levels and turnover in front line teams are high and rising, and large proportions of locum and international workers are used to plug the gap between demand and supply. Resources are tight, need is rising, and the current system for the education and training of practitioners appears inconsistent, and at times inadequate.

The result is a profession where staff often appear to lack the vital analytical and communication skills required in order to effectively calculate and manage risk and promote safeguarding. In such a profession, the need for innovation is clear, whilst the capacity to absorb such innovation is, in places, lacking. The missing piece in the puzzle is the management card. Traditionally, social work managers are practitioners first, managers second – the management role is an add-on to the traditional social work task. Without any formally recognized national progression route or career structure, such as exists in other professions like teaching and nursing, the training of social work managers is inconsistent nationally. The result is a lack of the management capacity for innovation in a profession where innovation is very much needed.

Laming's findings in *The Victoria Climbié Enquiry* (2003), whilst acknowledging that the standard of work undertaken by the practitioners involved was poor, directed most criticism at the failure of managers in ensuring that services were properly financed, staffed and able to deliver. The child's death was said to represent a "gross failure of the system of public agencies put in place to protect vulnerable children from deliberate harm", concluding that "primarily this failure was due to widespread organizational malaise" (Laming, 2003).

The fact that the second Laming review, *The Protection of Children in England: A Progress Report* (Laming, 2009), highlighted the existence of much the same problems and failings as its predecessor, shows that the influence of the *Every Child Matters* (2004) reforms has not been far-reaching. Lessons from past failings appear to have been forgotten, and government promises for change have failed to deliver. In short, the time is ripe for radical

innovation in the way children's social care systems are resourced and managed in Great Britain.

The key message coming from both Laming and the subsequent Social Work Task Force reports is that, as a profession, the success of social work relies almost entirely on the productivity and effectiveness of its workers. It is those workers who are responsible for entering the homes of vulnerable families and ensuring that children at risk of harm are appropriately safeguarded. It is those workers who must analyze complex social situations and assess the level and likelihood of risk. It is those workers who must put in place systems to support and protect families where risk is high, and who often do all of this in the face of significant resistance from the families they seek to support.

Currently, those workers are characterized variously as being under trained, under-skilled, under-resourced and under-supported. Laming describes the challenge for workers as, "a demanding task. Their work requires not only knowledge and skill but also determination, courage, and an ability to cope with sometimes intense conflict" (Laming, 2009, 4). Despite these demands, the Social Work Task Force report highlighted that currently, the academic entry criteria for professionally-qualifying social work programmes is low, and that "some programmes have admitted students who may not be fully suitable in order to boost numbers" (SWAP, 2010, 9). Published entrance requirements fall as low as 120 UCAS points, the equivalent of 2 A-Levels, significantly lower than the requirements for nursing or education programmes.

More worryingly, it was highlighted that "a minority of students have difficulty employing higher-order analysis and critical thinking skills" (SWAP, 2010, 9). Laming's concludes, "The message of this report is clear: without the necessary specialist knowledge and skills social workers must not be allowed to practice in child-protection" (Laming, 2009, 5). It appears then that a radical shift is required in the current process for selecting and training social workers, and indeed in the way social work is viewed as a profession.

As Drucker points out, "increasingly, the success – indeed, the survival – of every business will depend on the quality of its knowledge workforce" (Drucker, 2002, 7). This statement is particularly true for social work. Social workers are knowledge workers, just as lawyers, doctors and teachers are knowledge workers. Currently, social work managers often fail to recognize this and to create an environment where their "knowledge workers" are able to work most effectively to achieve objectives. What this paper goes on to explore is how the traditional local authority social services department might benefit from innovating on private-sector management techniques in order to support, strengthen and increase the productivity of its "knowledge workforce".

Looking at the *Every Child Matters* reforms, implemented in 2004 as a result of *The Victoria Climbié Enquiry*, it is clear that technological innovation was believed to be the way forward for the improvement of the social work profession. The Integrated Children's System (ICS) "provides a conceptual framework, a method of practice and a business process to support practitioners and managers in undertaking the key tasks of assessment, planning, intervention and review" (DCSF, 2009).

Whilst the concept of ICS was sound, the management of its implementation was poor, with each local authority left to "produce its own solution for ICS" – the result is an array of ICT systems and software that have developed piecemeal across areas and over time, in response to local need. The result, in many local authorities, is a series of computer systems that are time-consuming, difficult to use, and involve duplication of information. ICS systems do not link up across areas, making information sharing across agencies harder, not easier, whilst the social worker spends increasingly more time at their desk and less time with their client.

The ICS embodies technical innovation gone astray. The cause? ICS is based on upon the assumption of the traditional workforce, that is, that "what made the traditional workforce productive was the system" (Drucker, 2002, 6). Following the theory embodied by Ford's iconic assembly line, the traditional system "is productive because it enables individual workers to perform without much knowledge" (Drucker, 2002, 6). Essentially, what the ICS attempted to do was "systematize" the social work task by making the process of assessment and intervention into an "assembly-line" whereby the worker's assessment becomes a kind of tick-box exercise of information input.

Thoughtful analysis and use of worker knowledge is stifled within a process that encourages the standardization of complex social problems into "categories" of risk and need. Within this standard system, the child assessment process becomes an almost automated process where the child is forced to fit the nearest appropriate box, rather than the box being designed to fit the child. The risks with such a standardized system are apparent in the Baby Peter case; indicators of abuse slip through the net because the worker is no longer stimulated to undertake a thoughtful and critical analysis of all the factors and incidents present in a case.

So what is the alternative option? If in a traditional workforce, the worker serves the system, in a knowledge workforce, the system must serve the worker, because it is each individual worker's productivity that makes the entire system a success (Drucker, 2002, 6). My suggestion is this; that children's social services departments consider "privatizing" their attitudes to workforce management. The social worker of the future should be considered a "child-protection consultant", and should be managed and treated as such. The social worker of the future should be an expert practitioner with detailed specialist knowledge; highly trained, highly regarded, highly supported, and highly paid.

There is currently a lack of strong leadership and management within the profession, with service managers unwilling to take responsibility for supporting the workers whose performance they rely upon. As Laming says, "more should be done to ensure the well-being and confidence of staff who undertake such an important task on behalf of us all" (Laming, 2009, 4). As Drucker says, "the challenge is to make ordinary people do extraordinary things" (Drucker, 2002, 6). This can only be done in an environment where excellence is demanded and rewarded; an environment currently sadly lacking in the public sector.

The essential difference between the private and public sector is profit; most private sector businesses have the primary aim of making money. For public sector organizations, and social services departments in particular, the focus is primarily on output levels, and on maximizing provision of services

within budgets. In this kind of environment, demand is high, resources are pressured, and hard work is not rewarded financially. The rewards of the job are often not visible, and certainly not monetary. Demanding excellence in such an environment is challenging.

Since public finances are shrinking, and demand in the social services rising, this set-up doesn't look set to change. But what if children's social services departments were privatized? Would it be ethically viable to outsource the provision of child protection services to the private sector, and what might the effect of this be? My vision is this: Small teams of highly trained expert practitioners, able to manage high caseloads of complex cases more efficiently. No wastage, no duplication, only highly integrated support systems that make information easy to record, recall and share with other practitioners. Each team led by a strong and motivated leader, offering regular, critical and reflective supervision, and driving performance against targets through robust performance management frameworks. Each worker would be driven, motivated and financially rewarded.

For this vision to become a reality, current social services budgets would be entirely redirected to the private sector, creating an ironic moral dilemma. In a profession striving to eliminate social inequality and promote equality of opportunity, can multi-million pound public budgets be pumped into private businesses where executives and managers will be making a profit? Certainly, it would be a controversial political proposal for any government to make.

What are the alternatives? Looking at the progress made in "professionalizing" social work over the past-decade, with the introduction of the social work degree and the drive to create a national career structure, is appears we are already moving in the right direction. The work of the Social Work Task Force over the past 18 months has brought the challenges facing the profession to the forefront of media and public scrutiny, and still more applicants wish to join the profession than ever before. The drive for more consistent national training, both of social workers and social work managers, as well as a call for stronger support and supervisory mechanisms, recognizes social work as a "knowledge profession" where workers need more skills and more support.

The radical proposal to privatize children's social services, in order to create a new wave of "child-protection consultants" who have the knowledge and skills to undertake the social work task more effectively, may only be financially viable with the introduction of new forms of taxation and income generation. Such financial demands would place increasing pressure on tax-payers and would not be politically acceptable. But that doesn't mean that the ideology behind such proposals is not transferrable. What if public sector leaders and social services managers spearheaded a drive for a transformation of the social work identity? Could social work managers adopt private sector management ideology to remodel the social work role in line with the private sector consultancy role?

Options such as performance-related pay and bonuses, ongoing professional development and 360-degree appraisals could be used to instill a performance-driven culture where the focus is on achieving desired results and delivering against business objectives. This kind of "privatization" of the public sector worker role is needed to drive change forward and positively

motivate ordinary workers to "do extraordinary things". Such developments would require significant buy-in and financial investment from senior managers, as well as determined and consistent leadership. In the current climate, where vast and ongoing reform has been promised for social work as a profession, the time is ripe for the "privatization" and professionalization of the social work role to be explored more fully.

As the rapid pace of social change continues, and as accompanying social problems become more complex, we will increasingly need "knowledge workers" who are more highly skilled; more responsive, more reflective, more analytical, to help find solutions to these problems. If the public sector workforce is unable to step-up and provide such skills, the privatization of the social work role of public problem solving may have to be considered as an innovative solution to a very real challenge.

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