

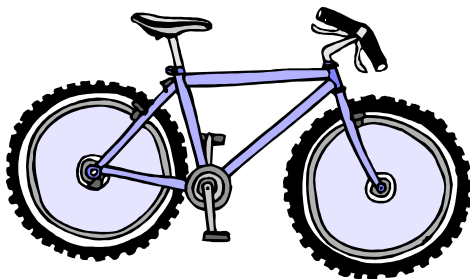
YELLOW SUBMARINES AND AILING FROGS

– Coping with the current changes in the NHS

You do not need to spend much time in the company of NHS leaders and managers today to be struck by the pervasive sense of frustration, weariness and cynicism which many feel as they face yet another round of NHS “re-disorganisation”. However, more alarming than the inevitable sense of concern for their own jobs and their staff, is a worrying unease at the lack of an apparent compelling narrative for the current changes. In other words, it is not easy for frontline senior managers and clinicians to explain why the current changes are happening and how they will improve things for either patients or staff. The NHS itself feels decidedly ill-at-ease as the financial squeeze comes on like never before and more far reaching policy reforms than seen for generations begin to take root.

This short article attempts to explain why the NHS might feel like this and how leaders might cope through the current change process. I will use two metaphors for this – Frogs and Yellow Submarines

Systems thinking - Frog and Bicycle.



Alistair Mant describes system complexity using the colourful metaphor of the frog and the bicycle¹. You can improve the performance of a bicycle by changing its parts; what you do to the chain sprocket is largely independent of what you do to the front wheel bearing. But you cannot do the same to a frog, which is a complete, complex, interconnected organism. You can take bits off the bicycle, change them and put them back. You can, to a limited degree, do the same to a frog – particularly no doubt with the general increase in surgical sub-specialisation! However, at some point, the frog can take it no more, and dies.

Mant provides several examples, mainly from the UK public sector, in which managers, trying to ‘improve’ their own defined areas of responsibility, caused huge damage to the wider whole system. Rail privatisation is an obvious example most of us have suffered with in some way. Another is the idea popular with government that scripted call centres can offer a more efficient public service than discussing your problem with real people.

A key characteristic of the public sector is interactive complexity and interconnectivity – which is surely especially so for the NHS. What happens in one part will affect other parts. The NHS, perhaps even more so than other parts of the public sector needs a large

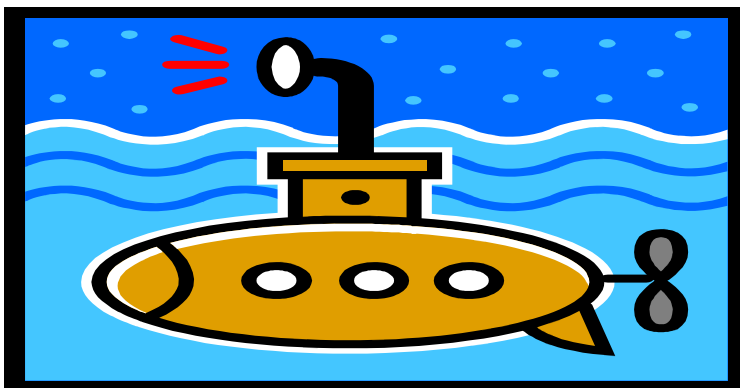
amount of coordination, and people at all levels who understand the complexity of healthcare systems, and who can see the big picture. In essence the NHS is much more like a frog – albeit a big one - than a bicycle. To describe organisations as living organisms is well accepted in organisational theory and practice.² For leaders to consistently act like it is true is perhaps a bit rarer.

It seems to me that the current application of major policy changes to the NHS [choice, contestability, etc.] alongside further reorganisation of SHAs, PCTs and Ambulance Trusts, increasing financial strictures and the establishment of Foundation Trusts smacks of bicycle thinking. Whilst each individual policy or structural change may make sense in its own right, when put together they are in danger of making the frog very sick. They do not necessarily all add up to improve the whole. They also are arguably more than the NHS system can healthily take at the same time

Clearly major change is needed in performance and responsiveness as public expectations continue to rise. However if you understand the NHS is more like a frog – a large complex living organisational system - you will approach bringing about sustainable and profound change in a more sensitive and organic way. You will seek to craft national policy and top management change differently. We need to make the whole frog more healthy and fit, not just swap its bits for higher-tech ones. This may be more challenging than bicycle-based thinking but is surely more likely to succeed.

So the NHS frog is unwell. How should leaders within it cope? How can you manage yourself, your colleagues and your services through such system ill health? How can you maintain a healthy focus in the no-mans land of in-decision and waiting? Hopefully there will be a better time coming – post reorganisation and the system reforms bedding in after no doubt some judicious further adjustment. The NHS has undeniably tremendous resilience and incredibly committed and historically loyal staff which has helped it survive thus far.³ I am therefore hopeful that the frog will survive despite the bicycle repairman's attentions.

We all live in a Yellow Submarine



I think we are in unusual times, which call for a specific leadership response. I would propose NHS leaders consider another metaphor for these times – the yellow submarine. I

was visiting a local primary school in a deprived and socially isolated community. Indicators for unemployment, broken families, crime and ill health all ran well ahead of the surrounding affluent and generally prosperous town. Yet within this challenging context the primary school was getting good results and had a great reputation with an inspirational headteacher. On her office wall I was struck by a large picture painted by the children of a yellow submarine. The Head described it as a symbol of the school she led. It was a safe space to be within when navigating a troubled sea, with clear rules and boundaries where teachers, pupils and helpers worked together with clear purpose, for a better future.

It strikes me that NHS leaders could consider creating their own "yellow submarines" for these turbulent times. In other words they need to deliberately seek to create and describe for their staff and the patients or clients they serve locally a safe space with clear system boundaries and a clearly defined, if limited, immediate aims. Within this space staff would be encouraged to pull together as a team or teams with a clear sense of direction through today's choppy waters.

As stated above organisations are frog-like complex adaptive systems that are shaped by their environment. They also constantly influence their environment - there is constant two-way feedback. This should guide how leaders usually facilitate the engagement of their organisations with their environment.

However NHS leaders at present might consider the yellow submarine as a short-term protective mechanism against what seems like a very "toxic" environment at present. The yellow submarine - unlike a frog - seeks to isolate itself (and its contents!) from the environment. This is only ever going to work as a short term protection strategy. As soon as the environment is more benign, leaders should once again focus on creating a sustainable (symbiotic) relationship between their organisations and the environment.

What might this look like?

I was in a similar position some years ago as a Chief Executive of a community/mental health Trust being disestablished to set up several local PCTs and a specialist mental health Trust. As a Board and Executive team through the last few months, we deliberately focussed our efforts on progressing a key PFI scheme and actively "neglected" less important agendas. We also sought to facilitate appropriate "grieving" for the ending of the Trust and preparation for what was to come. This sought to enable the new NHS organisations to make effective starts.

In PCTs today understandable fear of what restructuring might bring, can breed fear and cynicism which paralyses improvement. Many acute Trusts are afflicted by the "P45" culture. Chief Executives, Directors or senior managers can instead seek to create for their staff a "yellow submarine"- a safe and supportive working environment with regular communication and support for personal development. They can seek to actively focus staff teams on clear short-term aims which deliver clear patient benefit. They can actively manage their team(s) agenda and boundaries to facilitate this.

However before submerging in your submarine - a warning! Keep your periscope up. Be aware of the changes around you and who you need to keep in contact with. And at some stage you need to leave the submarine behind.....

Within the yellow submarine leaders are seeking to create a safe space for staff and patient care – where cynicism and fear does not paralyse continuous improvement. Too often times of change and merger have seen much needed improvement delayed, expected benefits not delivered and good staff lost.⁴ Most NHS leaders can not influence the overall NHS system level decision-making – but they can and must lead with purpose and sensitivity despite the ailing Frog. There will come a time of recovery and renewal – though the Frog may be a little different by then. Until then do you need to build a yellow submarine for your staff and services?

Alastair Mitchell-Baker
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Alastair is an organisational consultant and director of Tricordant Ltd. (www.tricordant.com). He is also a Non-executive Director of his local Ambulance Trust.

¹ Alistair Mant *Intelligent Leadership* (Allen & Unwin 1997).

² See for example Arie de Geus 'The Living Company; growth, learning and longevity in business' 1999, Nicholas Brearley Publishing.”

³ Anglia and Oxford Regional office “Sustaining the NHS” 1998

⁴ Braithwaite, J. ”Invest in people, not restructuring”, *BMJ* 2005 331: p. 1272-1272