

Failing to learn - or learning to fail?

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New research the University of Birmingham and the University of Manchester warns that there's no quick fix for tackling public sector failure. In fact it is often a harder and slower process than governments and regulators are willing to admit.

When things go wrong, as has been well-documented in the Baby Peter case, regulators are too willing to blame frontline workers, or sack chief executives.

However the research shows that failure is rarely as the result of an individual's performance; rather it is systemic and organisational in nature.

Manchester Business School's Professor Kieran Walshe, who headed up the research team, explains: "Sacking staff can just make things worse. If the chief executive automatically goes – then an external specialist is often parachuted in to fix the symptoms, rather than addressing underlying organisational causes. This can then be compounded with a flight of talent, as skilled individuals move to jobs elsewhere and it becomes more difficult to recruit."

The five-year project – partially funded by Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) – showed that organisations need to improve their ability to learn - specifically, to acquire, assimilate and then apply knowledge to improve their own performance.

Professor Chris Skelcher from the University of Birmingham's Institute of Local Government Studies adds: "Knowledge is often freely shared in the public sector – with encouragement to learn from good practice and few proprietorial or competitive barriers. However, the way public bodies take in and learn from that information isn't always effective enough to help them be successful."

The project initially examined poorly-performing NHS trusts and

local authorities. The team then secured ESRC funding to build on and broaden its work to look at other parts of the public sector, including schools, police forces, government agencies and charities – with the aim of understanding how problems could be spotted earlier and future failures prevented.

The research identified three key ways in which organisations can spot problems earlier with the aim of preventing future failings:

- A greater focus on developing capacity for their own learning and supporting organisational development
- Proactively looking for knowledge in order to improve – not just waiting until they have a specific need. For example, a school with exclusion problems will often only look to see how other schools manage their internal exclusion arrangements when a problem arises
- Becoming more comfortable with experimentation to test new ideas or adapt them to meet their own needs

The researchers also call for regulators, like Ofsted or the Care Quality Commission, to rely less on "hard" measures of performance, such as league tables, and to make more use of "soft" measures of organisations, like their capacity for learning and improvement.

Professor Skelcher concludes: "When regulators do intervene, they need to focus more on supporting organisational development and less on blaming individuals to fix the obvious performance problems. That may mean intervention takes longer, or costs more, but we think it is more likely to produce sustained improvements, which will endure when the regulator withdraws and the organisation has to take responsibility for its own performance."

Read more: Could do better? Knowledge, learning and improvement in public services, by Kieran Walshe, Gill Harvey, Chris Skelcher and Pauline Jas, mbs.ac.uk/hsi

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