

ARE WE THERE YET?

Why it's crucial to agree on the destination before you start the journey

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How can you tell if a journey is successful if you don't agree on the destination?

Consider a scenario:

We're all on the bus on the outskirts of Melbourne, excited to set out on a journey together that most of us couldn't have done alone. And we've agreed we're heading north.

There was a bit of conflict earlier over how much luggage could fit and who could bring what; but we worked it out together. Then there was some jostling for the best seats and a few awkward moments as strangers who found themselves sitting together started to break the ice.

But now we're all settled in, the driver is in her seat, the petrol tank is full and with a loud 'Hooray!' we pull out onto the Hume Highway heading north. In a few hours we arrive in Wangaratta and stop for lunch. Everyone piles out of the bus into a lovely shady park to enjoy a picnic.

But when the call comes to get back on the bus, conflict arises:

'What's the hurry? We just got here. Let's relax and enjoy the sunshine, explore the town and get to know each other better before we decide on the next leg of the journey.'

'But we've only just begun – there's so much further to go to get to Cairns...'

'Who said we were going to Cairns? I agreed to go north and here we are, in northern Victoria. Chill out!'

Others step in and suggest a compromise:

'How about we stop here tonight, build our relationships with each other so tomorrow we can have a better discussion and discover together whether we are ready to move on and if so, how far we want to go.'

Who do you think is happy with this outcome? The person who wants to stop in Wangaratta indefinitely unless there's a very good reason to move on? Unlikely, now they have to face a daily debate about whether Wangaratta is northerly enough.

What about the person who set out to get to Cairns? The one who now discovers they may never reach that goal unless they can mount a daily argument to go the next step, dragging the others all the way 'north'.

Or the rest of the group, who really haven't thought much about where a journey 'north' might take them? They just want a pleasant journey – but now they face the stress of daily conflict and potentially constant change without clear benefits.

It is unlikely anyone is satisfied with this scenario – and it's hard to image an ultimate outcome that would earn the label 'a successful journey'.

It is also unlikely that a group of intelligent people would actually start out on a bus journey with such vague understandings of their destination – but this is precisely how community service organisations often start out on the journey to create an integrated community

services hub – with a shared understanding of ‘integration’ about as clear as the bus travellers’ understanding of ‘north’.

To some, an integrated community services hub presents to the public as a single entity, behind which sits seamless relationships between the different agencies and the services they offer – a single intake point for every client using a service in the hub; a single data base of client records so no-one has to tell their story twice; regular joint professional development mandated for all staff working in the hub to build a common culture – all conducted under a single brand for the hub itself, with the branding of the individual agencies a clear second.

This is the ‘Cairns’ destination, popular with theorists, advocates and policy makers, rarely seen in practice.

For other agencies, being part of an ‘integrated’ community services hub is simply a way to enjoy the benefits of co-location – better facilities than they can afford alone; cost savings in shared administration; the opportunity to get to know other agencies in the hub through informal contact, and discover, eventually, without pre-scripting the outcome, whether there is potential to do new things together in a more structured way.

The ‘Wangaratta’ destination.

And for others, there is a range of ambitions in between – maybe if we get to ‘Albury’ we can hope to get more referrals from the other agencies in the hub to build our client base and so ensure the viability of our service.

Perhaps if we bring everyone along to ‘Sydney’ we could create something new together to supplement our core services, like a community garden for clients to do voluntary work in, building their social networks, skills and confidence.

And a journey to ‘Brisbane’ could entail two or more of the agencies attracting new funding to create new services in collaboration with each other to better meet the needs of the community.

But if everyone starts the journey of change to create a community services hub without an agreed destination, it is likely to be a very rough ride – and ultimately to bring disappointment to most, if not all of the agencies involved.

A wise person once told me that research on the psychology of change suggests that the best way to achieve real change is to define the goals of that change very, very tangibly; to define the destination of your journey of change so clearly that everyone can see it, touch it and taste it. And this vivid sense of the destination needs to be restated regularly along the way so it remains fresh and tangible.

Change is difficult – it requires extra effort, work on top of the routine of the usual way of doing things. And a journey of 3,000 km from Melbourne to Cairns is much harder than a 3 hour journey to Wangaratta.

We will struggle to bring a group of agencies along on the journey to ‘integration’ unless we first take the time to clearly spell out what we mean by the destination, so everyone on the bus subscribes to the same vision of why it’s worth the effort to get all the way there.