

People-centric services – self-evident or unattainable?

We are a people-centric organisation. We do people-centric policy. We provide people-centric services. We hear it often enough, in vision statements, in strategies and in policies. It appears in our resumes and when we proffer our bona fides to colleagues. “People-centric” is an adjective that shows you are a contemporary thinker and have moved on from... what? What wasn’t people-centric for leaders or policies or services? This isn’t given enough thought or consideration and people-centric language is thrown around too easily without considering what it could or should mean. Let’s explore.

Public services are for people (mostly – sometimes for trees, but mostly for people). And the design and decision-making surrounding these services must be done with people in mind. So, why is it necessary to specify that we work on people-centric services?

The part that goes “unsaid” is that people who authorise, design and fund services are focused on things which do not relate to the client, consumer or person they are purporting to help. They are focused on something else.

What is it meant to be?

Being person-centric refers to an approach or mindset that prioritises the needs, preferences, and well-being of individuals. It means designing policies, services, or actions with a focus on making them flexible, accessible, and tailored to meet the unique requirements of each person involved. They aim to provide the right support, in the right way at the right time.

People-centric approaches use more participatory design, support a more diverse and inclusive workforce, embrace lived experience, and they welcome and respond to feedback and lessons from practice. They are culturally appropriate and can adapt to support other co-existing needs.

How many of these things need to be present for something to be people-centric? Or, to put it differently, if you are doing all these things, is that enough?

What isn’t people-centric?

Things that aren’t people-centric focus on the needs of the organisation, the process or the political context. A lot of what we do inside an organisation and as decision-makers is not people-centric. And for good reason.

Things that aren’t people-centric are:

- » rationing budgets and managing funds,
- » responding to political priorities or timelines,
- » meeting legislative, administrative or reporting requirements, and
- » doing what is possible with the infrastructure, workforce or technology available.

In the world of policy and delivery, we sometimes refer to these things as “constraints.”

Have a quick look back at what I suggested were people-centric actions, and then a quick look at the non-people centric things. Which take prominence?

People-centric work is often limited to what is possible after the non-people-centric conditions have been satisfied.

Are we “People-washing”?

Are we falling into a trap of saying something is people-centric and then doing the bare minimum to make it defensible? Or by saying it and then only addressing half the problem?

The non-people-centric parts of work inside government are very real and very relevant. That

doesn't mean they are beyond question. Being people-centric starts where we let it start. If we succumb to all the "must do's" as being too rigid to change, and just work with what's left – we can still make a difference. But the difference will be small.

Being people-centric needs to be more than this.

It needs to pay closer attention to what the implied opposite to people-centric work is – that is "organisation-centric" work. And it needs to look at what can change organisationally (people, processes and systems), that can build a more fertile environment for people-centric work to thrive.

We need to activate the all-important question – "wait, but why?" – about a lot more of what we do.

Why do we do it this way? The "system" of policy, design and delivery is very strong in making us think a vast array of things needs to be done in a certain way to be effective or to meet expectations.

Very often it is these things that create the constraints for people-centric work taking place. A funding period too short to make a difference, data requirements that measure something we could count not something that mattered, a strict set of rules that says who this is for and who it isn't for.

So, what should people-centric mean?

I think being people-centric means two things:

- i. having a mind-set that immediately goes to scenarios to how decisions would play out for specific people in specific circumstances, and
- ii. looking at the ways we do business and thinking about what helps, or what hinders expanding people-centric behaviours in design and delivery of services.

They are not the same thing. And that's ok, they don't need to be.

We need to build the skills and capabilities of the former – in policy, design and delivery. It is a great way to keep our services human and effective.

However, the first description above is limited in how it can be applied in decision-making.

In the way we currently work, it is no doubt very useful, but will, in the end, serve as a guide, a case-study, a sensitivity analysis, or a risk-management exercise. It is a great way of framing engagement and approaches to design and thoughts about delivery improvements. It doesn't translate to (for example) weighing up many competing priorities across different portfolios.

People-centric actions, as per description two, are also those that take a serious look at what constrains flexible, accessible and tailored services, and considers how those constraints can be mitigated or managed. The analysis needs to follow the lines of causation for these constraints, and then look at what can be done to work around them.

This approach needs to be strategic (where are the points of influence or pivot points?) and exploratory, reflective and adaptive. These are dynamic systems we are playing with.

So, to assess if you are working in a people-centric organisation, ask yourself: Who is doing this in your organisation? What authorisation do they have to question or amend processes? What convening power do they have to steer leaders away from their day-to-day work to think about themselves or their actions?

Undertakings like these can spoken about and not done, set-up as a transaction to be completed, or embraced as part of the way of doing business.

Within government, very few organisations make it to a point of being able to have truly adaptive, people-based assessments of themselves. Money is too tight, deadlines too pressing, administrative requirements too high.

But this is the essence of the problem. It is these constraints that limit our ability to change and improve. We need to direct more resources, more time and more mental effort to seeing what is really stopping people-centric services being more than just a convenient label.