

## **Public Sector Value Statements as Talismans against ‘evil’.**

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### **Abstract<sup>1</sup>**

Writing values may seem straightforward, especially in public institutions that are generally well connected to the values they espouse. But, as Hoggett (2006) has argued, the public sector is complex because its work is filled with value and because it holds values that may be disowned by the wider society.

This paper explores two aspects of writing value statements using local government as a case study and noting the impact of private sector models on public enterprise. Firstly, it argues that writing these statements without consideration of the conflictual nature of values may result in staff cynicism or inertia and secondly that having such value statements may not protect an organisation from infiltration by values of the wider society that may be considered contrary to the operation of the organisation. The paper is based on my PhD research concerning value in local government and is informed by a systems psychodynamic approach. My research suggests that value statements in the public sector appear to function as talismans against the anxiety of thinking about ourselves, and our world, in all its complexity and the ambiguity of working in a highly conflictual arena.

A value statement may hide as much as it reveals, and what is hidden has more potential to cause trouble. Value statements in the private sector may well be a defence against the recognition of greed. Yet public institutions exist to support and protect us. Do these institutions articulate values as a means of protecting themselves from the imposition of undesirable social values or from acknowledging their existence within the enterprise?

My research shows that having a set of values formalised in the workplace does not necessarily improve value-based behaviours and that it may in fact form a barrier between leaders and staff, especially if leaders are not seen to enact organisational values.

Listing values can be a search for a magical solution to the dilemmas we find ourselves in. The imposition of neoliberal views on the operation of the public sector has led it to use ‘magical’ talismans such as value statements, not to encourage deep thinking about the task and role of local government, but to protect it from the imposition of other values.

### **Introduction**

I come from Melbourne, Australia. Melbourne is a modern industrial city, a capital city of nearly 4 million people. The suburb I live in is a Jewish area, part of the ‘Bagel Belt’ of Melbourne. Many of my Jewish neighbours have a Mezuzah (Zaklikowski 2007) across the front door of their homes. For those who don’t know, a Mezuzah is a Talisman designed to stop evil from entering the house, when the front door is opened. The Mezuzah is a piece of writing (the Shema) on parchment from

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<sup>1</sup> I want to thank Peter Gronn, Larry Hirschhorn and John Bottomley for providing comments on early drafts of this paper.

the Torah, encased in a small box and positioned tilted towards the room inside to indicate that God and the Torah are coming into the room. This custom is alive with connection to its narrative roots. Mezuzot have both a protective power (by providing long life) and by reminding Jews of how to behave both inside the home and outside it in keeping with the laws of the Torah.

It is my thesis that the writing and posting of value statements in public and not for profit enterprises functions in a similar way to the Mezuzah, in that they are hung up at the front door of the organisation (sometimes literally) to protect those within from the threat of evil rushing in. There has been a clear sense of evil coming in since the reform period of the late 1980s and early 1990s in Australia, as elsewhere. I think there is a deep-seated fear of the worst excesses of neoliberalism coming into the spaces occupied by service organisations and damaging them.

In this paper I look at the writing of value statements in public sector institutions as talismans against the importation of technologies, language and ways of behaving that have invaded from the private sector. Firstly, I outline what I mean by talisman, and then I describe the changes that have occurred in recent years in local government in Australia where the neoliberal view of the world can be seen to be acting on public agencies. Following this, I describe what I mean by values and how the language of values has been used in an instrumental sense by businesses and emulated by the public sector.

I then argue that fear of the imposition of values from outside the system is strong amongst public sector workers and causes them to employ values statements as a form of technology to both hide from perceived persecution by 'evil' outside the system and to protect against intrusion. In this way, I believe values statements are defences against anxiety.

The thinking in this paper has built on my doctoral research where I conducted semi-structured, face-to-face interviews of 18 local government CEOs and spent six months shadowing one CEO, to gain views on the values they espoused in their work for the sector and how they were perceived in their roles as leaders in the public sector.

Finally the paper calls on leaders in the public sector to link activities and goals to a narrative past, rather than adopt technologies from the private sector with their concomitant mindset of regulation and surveillance. In order to re-build trust and solidarity within the sector, leaders need to adopt behaviours more aligned with the Kleinian depressive position and explore meaning, symbol and narrative for the public sector with re-newed hope.

### **Talisman definition**

I have described a Mezuzah as a talisman. The Webster's dictionary defines talisman as an object that is supposed to have magic powers to protect its owner; something that produces extraordinary effects, especially in averting or repelling evil. The object itself tends to be imbued with magical powers. A talisman is believed to avert evil and bring good fortune to its owner by virtue of its magical properties (Barr, Berkovitch, Matras, Kocer, Greenberg & Eshel 2000). This is clearly the case in medical emergencies, where Barr et al found 30% of the families of 50 child patients admitted to a hospital ICU, brought talismans with them to protect their child while s/he was ill. The researchers found that the most common form of talisman was a written text; specifically a quote or psalm from the bible, or the bible itself, a picture of a holy person, holy water or oil.

Interestingly hospital staff reported in that study that the use of these talismans seemed to reduce family anxiety levels. Similarly, Rosner (1999) described a patient wearing a talisman around her neck to cure her leukaemia. Rosner is not convinced of the power of the talisman to cure, but notes that its power resides in the belief of the wearer of its protective properties. In this example the

focus is shifted from the talisman as symbol to talisman as technology. Rosner describes the phenomenon by what is observable; what can be seen and measured and concludes that while the results of chemotherapy can be measured, the power of the talisman cannot. But for the wearer there is belief attached to the object. The object points to something beyond the self. I do not think of a talisman in any pejorative sense when it is connected to its narrative roots as symbol. In the cases cited here and the case of the Mezuzah, the talismans have deep connection with historical roots and evocation of story.

### **Fear in a time of change**

We can surmise from the examples given that although we think of ourselves as thoroughly logical and rational in the 21st century, there is a part of us that clings to the hope of magical solutions. It could also mean that the “age of faith” is not actually dead and that the thesis of secularisation, as part of modernisation, may well be wrong (personal communication: Peter Gronn). The need to look outside our individuality is especially true in times of conflict, danger or turbulence. The old order of stable organisational structures and clear authority in public institutions is giving way to the new order based on a business model. In this new order the old principles of public service encompassing stewardship and custodianship have given way to notions of efficiency and customer service. This change to the way things are done tends to make staff in public service organisations more vulnerable and less able to maintain internal stability.

When operating in the paranoid-schizoid state of mind, as described by Melanie Klein, we use patterns of thinking which cause us to be rigid and black and white in the way we see the world. We employ defence mechanisms that prop up our view that either evil resides in the other or that it may reside only in ourselves. Building on Klein’s work, Jaques shows the interaction of the individual with the organisation and that organisational patterns, rituals, and structures can affect the mode of operating of individuals in the organisation (Jaques 1955). In 1995 James Krantz said that change is constant and that we are ‘careening’ into a new world order in terms of organisational structure and form. Change in his view is explosive, constant, unpredictable, on a steep gradient, pervasive, turbulent, wrenching, causing immense pressure to find new forms of enterprise. Krantz uses this thinking to support his hypothesis that in the past organisations may have been able to tolerate behaviours arising from the paranoid-schizoid mode, but now this is less adaptive to the rapid change we see. There is, in Krantz’s view, less room for error these days.

While I am not entirely convinced of the scale of the changes actually occurring in organisational form and structure, the rhetoric of the urgency of change is certainly real. As Cooper (2001) says, we are all implicated in a collective state of worrying about what might go wrong, rather than focussing on what we can, and are, doing right. This mindset of fear has brought change to the way government bureaucracies are managed over the past two decades in particular, and I see the power of the paranoid-schizoid position at work in organisations today. When we come together the organisational space becomes the container for projection by the individual and also a source of introjection (Krantz 1995). The reality that we ‘see’ in our organisational life is influenced by our own internal images and these are in turn influenced by the functioning of the organisation. Organisations can either reinforce defensive patterns of behaviour or encourage a more creative exploration of change. I think, also, that the boundaries between organisational spaces are permeable. I am particularly interested in the permeability of the boundaries between the public and the private sectors. This paper is concerned with the idea that values from outside the public sector can penetrate and influence ways of acting within the sector, to its detriment. I believe that the worldview of those who work in the public sector is challenged by the worldview of neoliberalism that permeates the processes and goals of the public sector. In the paranoid schizoid state, this challenge is given a supranatural power, the power of evil. The neoliberal view is perceived as evil as it infiltrates the public sphere. This occurs as those who work in the sector

wish to reject the climate of regulation, audit, surveillance and the lack of trust that is behind it, whilst at the same time being part of that environment.

### **Change in the Public Sector**

Since the 1980s the public sector in Australia has been imbued with the language of business management. These changes also affected local government and between 2003 and 2006 I investigated the impact of these changes on local government in the State of Victoria. In part, local government changed because other levels of government forced changes to the operation of local government and also because public sector managers by and large, have accepted the conventional wisdom that the private sector provides better models for managing large organisations. In the 1990s with the election of a conservative State government, further change was brought to the operation of local government in the State of Victoria. The sector was required to market test its services and programs – with 50% of its activities required to be put to competitive tender. This meant that typical local authority services such as child care, services for youth and families, libraries, public garden and road maintenance and the like were put to competitive tender. In addition, elected Councillors were dismissed, ability to raise revenue was capped and local authorities were forcibly amalgamated.

After 5 years of large-scale changes in local government and the public sector generally, elections saw the State government change again. In 1999, the new State Labor Government decided to ‘quietly remove the most objectionable features’ of the previous era (Hill 2003:6). Nevertheless, today the language of business is *lingua franca* in local government in Victoria. The pressure to conform to a business model is strong; in fact it is legislated in the case of local government. In order to be (or appear to be) legitimate, local government authorities must adopt the expected language and processes of the business model (Oakes, Townley & Cooper 1998). The Victorian *Local Government Act* stipulates that ‘principles of sound financial management’ must be adhered to by local government and that it must prepare a Council Plan, which outlines the strategic objectives of the Council; Strategic Resource Plan and a budget annually (*Local Government Act* clauses 125, 126, 127).

### **Neoliberalism**

I am not suggesting that everything from the private sector is bad for the public, but rather that elements of good management can be distinguished from the wholesale adoption of techniques and values from the private sector, which are these days heavily influenced by public choice and agency economic theories which posit (amongst other things) that competition inevitably leads to efficiencies. These theories underpin the view that the market is the best regulator of all forms of enterprise. The total adoption of the neoliberal worldview causes a value conflict within the sphere of local government and the adoption of value statements is an example of a defence against this conflict. As Smith (2003) suggests, the “ism” of neoliberalism seems to have worked its way into the ‘bricks and mortar of our social infrastructure’.

It is difficult to separate the tools and technologies of the private sector with the sense of scarcity, competition and surveillance that accompany them. It seems that trust in individuals and in institutions has been replaced by trust in systems that measure and account for action (Cummins 2002). The pervasiveness of neoliberalist thought and adherence to its tenets has an almost ‘religious’ quality about it. It is difficult to counter the idea that the regimes of accountability and efficiency that exist in both the private and public sectors are for the good. I think that the tenets of neoliberalism have become so imbued with power that a ‘magical’ talisman is required to counter their perceived evil.

Public services are at the forefront of the conflicts inherent in how we live: in a capitalist economy where as Smith suggests ‘created scarcity is necessary to make money’ (Smith 2003:484), economic thinking requires a mindset of scarcity and the attitude that we are all in competition with each other, that we are motivated by self interest and that life is a struggle to survive and this belief can invade our thinking in every sphere. Yet the public and not for profit sectors exist to provide for safety and wellbeing of the citizenry. So how can they operate successfully in the current climate? There seems to be an inherent values conflict.

## **Values and Civil Society**

Values are constructs to which we attach worth. They are axioms to live by. People attribute values to the experience of living, essentially making constructs appear real. So each of us thinks that a particular state of affairs is ‘good’ or ‘right’, and it is therefore presented as more important or better than another situation. It is inevitable that when we make a decision, we make a choice between two or more courses of action and in order to decide which course of action is the best in the given situation, we consider what we value.

The dominant value system at present in the West, suggests that what is important in society is efficiency, individualism, rationality, freedom of choice, self-interest and that scarcity requires each of us to work hard to secure access to resources, whether they be material wealth or other items of value such as status, power, respect of others and, of course, control over our environments.

We seem to have come to a place where we believe the market rules everything and morality is a private matter for individuals. Wolfe (1989:189) speaks of the ‘withering away of civil society’, by the encroachment of neoliberalism into all spheres of activity. The notion of the market place as dominant may have trespassed upon civil society but civil society has not disappeared. For local government CEOs in my research, civil society exists still and they argue that a large part of their work is to strengthen and encourage it.

I interviewed 18 local government CEOs all of whom said they work in the sector because of a belief in the ‘common good’ and in ‘making a difference’. They felt that they were the subject of high expectations from the public in terms of stewardship, and the trust that is placed in them to care for citizens. These expectations are value laden and CEOs expressed difficulty in reconciling notions of *efficiency*, that they feel are imposed from outside the system, with those of *democracy* that are inherent in the system. They said the role of local government is to develop local communities, foster democracy and advocate on behalf of local citizens. No mention was made by any of them of wanting to improve the bottom line, increase efficiency, to make local government more responsive to its customers or improve its accountability to its ratepayers. As one CEO who had moved across from the private sector put it

*“As you go through your career at certain points you stop and re-assess. Do you continue to want to climb a corporate ladder or think more in terms of values and what you do having some inherent value to it?”*

Those who accept that a business model is a better way of managing organisations can tend to denigrate the public sector as an outmoded way of organising. The term bureaucracy conjures up visions of inefficiency, covert decision-making, red tape, waste and lack of accountability. In contrast ‘good management’ is a positive term envisioning efficiency, accountability and desirable outcomes (Gregory 2000:110). Its business critics define bureaucracy as rigid, static, moribund and stagnant. My point is that good management has become linked in our minds with the neoliberal values of self interest and efficiency, instrumental though they are, to such an extent that only a

business way of organising ourselves can be tolerated. Organisations must be lean, efficient, self-sufficient and continuously improving. This seems, as Winnicott suggests, a manic project in itself.

Du Gay (2000) argues that the various criticisms of bureaucracy all stem from the romantic desire to see one unifying ethos in all walks of life: what happens in business is a good model for all activities. Yet it is possible, and indeed desirable, to have a different set of values operating in the public sector. It seems to belong to the realm of fantasy to believe in a unifying model for all of life. Du Gay's central theme is that some ideas from the private sector may improve functioning in the public sector but that, essentially, they are different realms with different values and it should not be expected that they should operate in the same way. He reminds us that Weber felt that the ethos governing the conduct of the public servant and the businessperson were not transferable across the sectors (Du Gay 2000:8). It is dangerous to impose a different 'regime value' on the public sector. Yet that is what has occurred. Weber of course, believed that he was living in a time where the great power of the 'ultimate and sublime' values had retreated from the public realm (Gerth & Mills 1958:155). He argued that there is no final over-riding conclusion between spheres of activity or knowledge. 'The tension between the value spheres of "science" and the sphere of "the holy" is unbridgeable' (Gerth & Mills 1958:154).

Weber argued similarly in delineating his concepts of substantive and formal rationality, whereby he contended that formal rationality is the domain of large capitalist and bureaucratic enterprises where the emphasis is on rules, laws and regulations that are applied to determine a course of action. Substantive rationality, on the other hand, is where action is subject to values and ethical considerations. Weber feared substantive rationality was in decline with the rise of capitalist organisational structures. When the market drives decision-making using formal rationality, the decisions made are impersonal and not accessible to relationship between people. No sense of *caritas* can enter the equation; 'no personal bonds of any sort exist' (Gerth & Mills 1958:331). A century ago, Weber argued that formal rationality tends to dominate our workplaces and crowd out the thinking associated with substantive rationality.

Government has a legitimate mandate to pursue values other than self-interest. It can advance human rights, social justice, democracy and environmental sustainability through its laws and regulations (Bakan 2004). The public sector is a site of the enactment of the common good which must take precedence over individual self-interest in a healthy society. The principal purpose of local government is to provide service, not to generate profit. Local government managers operate in a complex environment providing up to 140<sup>2</sup> different services for their communities. They must meet the expectations from these communities, their own staff and those associated with the political agendas of both elected councillors and other levels of government. Local government works across the boundary of the personal and the political. It exists to enact the common good, whether that is in its role of stewardship or in providing for public safety. Paul Hoggett (2003) argues persuasively that the public sector does not have one single primary task and that all of its activities are 'saturated with value'. We cannot discuss what an organisation should or should not be doing without recourse to what is fair, what is good, what is ethical and what is the right thing.

The political sphere is the place of debate about social values and a well-functioning public bureaucracy can enhance democracy's capacity for debate about values. Hoggett (2003) sees that this is, in fact, the real business of public enterprise. He argues that public institutions constantly come up against value conflicts. The traditional values of democracy – liberty, fraternity and equality – are sometimes in conflict. Being fair and impartial may mean a needy group misses out. Supporting liberty in a particular instance may mean equality is lessened. Neoliberalism favours individualism over equality and fraternity. However, the common good is the greater good in a

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<sup>2</sup> Local government CEOs interviewed indicated the number of services they operated. They varied from 80 to 140.

healthy society, and the engagement with values, however complex in a democracy, is the means of exploring and furthering the common good.

### **Values based management**

The public sector, which had a the neoliberal view imposed upon it by a conservative government, has subsequently taken on the view that a business way of doing things is the best way and it emulates current trends and fads from the business world. Today, best practice in business means articulating values. Following several high-profile cases of corporate mis-management and greed, which came to light in the late 1990s, the OECD Council adopted recommendations for improving ethical conduct in the public service in 1998<sup>3</sup> and in 2000 the OECD reviewed its *Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises* (see OECD 1998; OECD 2003) and several management texts began addressing organisational values in some further detail (Haigh 2003; Cohan 2003). The term 'values-based management' came into vogue as the term describing the incorporation of values into company policy.

Research on the impact of writing organisational values is not well developed (Cha & Edmondson 2006). Nevertheless, values are incorporated into formal documentation in the public sector too. What is not discussed in depth is how statements of value can be enacted to make a public sector workplace the embodiment of the common good.

I support Hoggett's contention that the work of the public sector and not for profit groups is saturated with value. Having worked in that sector, I can attest to its complexity, to the difficulty in promoting the 'higher order' (Weber's ultimate and sublime) values of equality, justice, kindness and fairness in a climate of competing priorities and limited budgets. I attest also to the notion that working in the sector produces a value conflict of a different kind. The majority of those interviewed in my study of local government CEOs said that people choose to work in local government because they wish to do something worthwhile and help others. The introduction of a business model to organisations in the public sector is not a benign activity, it is damaging. Oakes et al (1998:277) called the introduction of a business-planning model to a provincial museum an 'act of symbolic violence' because it replaced the meanings created by those within the organisation with those created by people outside the institution and with reference to the external market. They argue that in this way, business planning is not simply a neutral technical tool, but represents a radical shift in cultural identify of the organisation. The tools were introduced as a means of managing environmental threats. (Oakes et al 1998:281)

### **Value conflict**

Klein (1975:218) suggests that people with a poorly developed internal sense of good avoid competitive situations because of the anxiety they arouse. Perhaps this is true of the museum workers in the previous example. Local government workers may also fit this scenario. They can feel good about themselves because they work in an environment that serves others and so they bolster their own internal sense of good. They prefer not to engage in risky, competitive behaviours.

Dealing with the sick, the vulnerable, the aged and those who break municipal laws arouses feelings in local government workers that are hard to contain. They can feel noble and altruistic and see themselves as strong and competent when dealing with vulnerable members of society. They can feel compassion and care, but also feel fear, contempt and hatred of the vulnerability,

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<sup>3</sup> This document was the impetus for the adoption of values in the Australian Public Sector.

weakness and incapacity of others. None of us wants to see it in ourselves. Local government deals in these difficult areas as well as in areas where laws are enforced to control and penalise citizens. This work evokes powerful feelings in both those who work in the enterprise and those who interact with it. Because government bureaucracies deal with our need for safety, fairness and justice they carry for us all collectively, an undiscussable denial of our collective vulnerability (Hoggett 2003).

Public sector workers must contain the fears of the wider society about sickness and death, as Hoggett suggests, but they must also contain their own fears of their worthiness to do the work they are drawn to do. Hoggett (2006) sheds light on the function of public institutions as a receptacle for that which society wishes to disown, he does not deal with the imposition of, and the intrusion of, embedded cultural values on how public sector workers deal with anxiety. In the absence of articulated personal values in the work of the public sector - or acknowledgment of the conflictual nature of values, there is a risk of embedded social values impinging on the system. What causes workers in the public sector to adopt a paranoid-schizoid position? Hoggett may say it is the anxiety associated with carrying social fears. I think there is more to it. There is the moral ambiguity of the work itself (local government can be both helpful and punitive) and the imposition of a set of constructs from outside the system, which workers then adopt, that leads people in the public sector to split off evil and have it reside in the other and thereby maintain the good self with the use of defence mechanisms. Value statements are one such mechanism.

Anxiety at work causes people to see themselves as good objects and they wish to keep themselves away from the bad, persecutory objects that are made to be of the external environment (Lawrence 1998). I am arguing that without conscious thought those who work in public institutions reject and fear the imposition of 'values' such as efficiency, transparency, individualism, rationality, freedom of choice, competition and self-interest, because they upset the deeply held notion that those who work in the sector do so to enact the common good. The imposition of instrumental and unwanted values from outside the sphere of the public sector heightens the split within the sector and threatens to undermine the precarious internal sense of good established by workers in the public sector. So it is defended against. The tools of the defence are those developed, paradoxically, by organisations adopting values based management, i.e values statements. Using the tool of the dominant system helps to both protect against and hide from the persecutory bad object. But it also makes the paranoid-schizoid position dominant, as collusion with the 'evil' must be denied.

### **Local Government Values Statements**

The CEOs I interviewed were able to describe the purpose of local government as making a difference, service, stewardship, advocacy, meeting community needs and aspirations, community well being, creating liveability, representing people's aspirations. But with the neoliberal model dominating, as the quote from one CEO shows, they feel apologetic about wanting to lead in a different way. One CEO said *'it seems a bit corny to say it, but people working in the public sector have an ethos of public service.'* Their desire to articulate the ethos of service and their struggle to make outcome based measures applicable show that they do fight against the expectations of the neoliberal model.

Writing values may seem to be straightforward, especially as public sector groups are generally well connected to the values they want to espouse. Articulating values has the advantage of positioning a public enterprise in the 'market', in other words it clearly advertises what it stands for and whom it serves. But attempts to marry market based 'values' with those of service can result in an unhappy union.

*...we prove value by achieving a balance between cost, price and quality aligned to community expectations and optimise technology to continually improve that value.*  
City of Knox Annual Report 2002-03.

In fantasy, value statements help people (including staff) to connect with the aims of the organisation. The hope they provide is that they will bring an organisation together and resolve underlying tensions. This is unrealistic. A value statement is a talisman because it is invested with magical powers to smooth away unspoken conflicts. It may hide as much as it reveals, and what is hidden has more potential to cause trouble. If there is unresolved conflict between key parties within the organisation, then value statements can, paradoxically, have the effect of burying that conflict and there is no easy way to address the underlying tension. In addition, there are often conflicts between values *themselves* and between the unspoken values associated with the work and those of the wider economic system. By articulating values we may hope to be protected from the messiness of life and deny that any conflict exists, but articulating values can bring conflict into sharper focus when we attempt to put the values into practice.

The two value statements below are included to show that the temptation is to list everything, to use jargon phrases and to include concepts without thinking through what a value may actually entail.

*The City of Hume – Statement of Values<sup>4</sup>*

Democracy  
Community Leadership  
Diversity  
Access and equity  
Advocacy  
Communication  
Sustainability  
Community partnerships  
Environment  
Staff development  
Efficiency and effectiveness  
Customer service

*City of Boroondara Values<sup>5</sup>*

Transparency and accountability  
Proactive and innovative leadership  
Alignment and consistency of decision making with council policy and direction  
Listening and responding to our community and sharing information with our community  
Sustainable and solution focussed outcomes  
A high level of professionalism  
A caring and enterprising approach which will develop and instil values based on honesty, respect and equity

The values adopted by public sector agencies are sometimes hard to grasp and it is hard to see how they are enacted in a practical way. Is sustainability, for example, a value – an irreducible axiom by which to live? Consultation and ‘Listening and responding to the community’ would seem to be a means to achieve a value, rather than the value itself. The meaning behind the values is

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<sup>4</sup> City of Hume Corporate Plan 2003-2006.

<sup>5</sup> City of Boroondara Council Plan 2002-2005.

sometimes lacking: Is staff development a value? What does 'environment' mean as a value? Similarly the lists show no recognition that the values may be in conflict in everyday applications. Integrity is a word in many local government lists, it usually accompanies honesty, but what does it actually mean? How does the list play out in the day-to-day? Does having this list enliven staff and help them to put the values in practice in their work? Or does it protect them from having to think about how the imposed values of efficiency and the 'user-pays principle' interact with those of service? Is a caring approach never at odds with an enterprising approach? Does having the list cover the lack of trust and the loss of hope that the prevailing economic system engenders?

In the past, bureaucratic organisational structures existed to protect staff from the anxiety of direct contact with complex situations where expectations are high. Organisations can serve as containers for the unwanted or hard to accept parts of ourselves (Obholzer 1994). With the new, leaner business model in place, staff now have limited protection from the bureaucracy container and must somehow, on their own (Krantz 1995), work out how best to enact the value of 'customer service' and at the same time ensure that they are living the value of 'continuous improvement'. The 'lean' organisation can sometimes mean simply being overwhelmed. Under these conditions workers detach themselves, not by using the organisation but through demoralisation; a refusal to care (personal communication, Larry Hirschhorn).

It is one thing to write a list of values, it is another thing entirely to try to put them into practice. If we look closely, we see that in practising one value wholeheartedly, we may compromise our capacities with another. For example, maintaining client confidentiality may compromise transparency in decision-making; innovative practice may not accommodate efficient management of resources. This is the reality of value conflict that is seldom discussed. It may be detrimental to the service of one value if we promote another. Writing value statements at first look, may seem to be a way of moving employees to the depressive position whereby they can actively reflect on the purpose of the organisation and their role in it. The depressive position calls for challenge to the typical ways of doing and understanding, it requires integrative thought: the true complexity of working in the public sector can be revealed and conveyed in the work. It allows us to see shades of grey in our own thinking and in the behaviour of others. If the writing of value statements were to encourage this, then it could be seen as a positive thing. But so often value statements are not used in this way. While superficially they appear to encourage integrative thought, they actually diminish it and support behaviours in the paranoid-schizoid state. The times we live in appear to reward behaviour in the paranoid-schizoid state as dialogue and co-operation are old fashioned and not efficient (Obholzer 1994). Listing, accounting and measuring give us the illusion of control over our environments. Surveillance, auditing and reporting provide us with facts and figures to assure us that we know the outcomes of our actions. These give us a sense of safety and control, but at the expense of creativity and discussion. Efforts to look more deeply into the actions of our institutions and to contemplate the contradictions and tensions we may find there are not encouraged. Cummins (2002:116) argues that the 'pathological demand for checking', collecting data and setting targets are not to know and understand but to control and provide a sense of assurance and comfort.

### **Values statements as a social defence**

Value statements are a social defence against unwanted feelings. They are a way of dealing with anxiety that comes with being part of an organisation. If there is no way to discuss and deal with the underlying issues, the anxiety is dealt with by defence mechanisms. Signs that value statements are a defence are the fact that they are generally presented as 'shopping lists' with no recognition of underlying conflict between them. When a social defence is operating the form is generally more important than the substance and people spend time on trivial matters, such as detailed discussion at the operational level, to avoid the anxiety, grief, shame, guilt or envy that may

actually be occurring inside the organisation (Kets de Vries & Balazs 2005). Value statements are listed in all public documentation and in several local authorities that I work with they are printed as large posters and put on the walls. Values once stated have an appealing simplicity about them.

The Australian Public Service (APS) has 15 values written into the *Public Service Act 1999*, including the 'value' that the APS has the highest ethical standards and the 'value' that the APS values communication. After these values had been enshrined in law, another document was required to assist government departments with putting the values into practice. Clearly, just naming the values was not enough. In 2003 the APS produced a booklet called *Embedding the APS Values*, which 'provides a simple way of explaining the Values in terms of relationships and behaviours, sets out how the Values can be promoted, managed and assured....'.

Rather than opening up debate about values these statements become edicts of acceptable behaviour. Statements of value used in this way become evidence that trust is missing; it cannot be taken for granted that staff will act with integrity (Cummins 2002). Instead of addressing potential conflict, organisations work hard to operationalise the values; they are 'rolled out' and 'drilled down' to all levels of staff, codified and measured in performance reviews, but without deep thought about how they enhance the work of a public service organisation, how conflict between personal and organisational values may be handled, how sections of the workforce may hold different values to those of the leadership and how values from outside the system may impinge on the sense of the good self for workers in the sector. Forces from outside do impinge, business language and thinking is expected. Paradoxically business tools are what are used to 'prove' the separateness and distinctiveness of the public sector. The focus on business practices is so pervasive that it holds public service workers in the psychotic state where the only allowable measure in reality, in both the public and private sectors, is efficient use of resources. Local government is defined as a business –its service areas are called business units. Measuring outcomes with efficiency is what is required these days to stay in business. The pressure from outside the system seems so great, that people in the sector, defend their position from the threat of annihilation. Unconsciously they write value statements to shore up their view of themselves as good: to counter the unspoken view that if local government is simply a business, then how are those who work in it any better than those who choose to work in profit generating businesses? But having a statement of values does not save the organisation from the dilemma of working for the common good when the prevailing social values suggest that self-interest is all that counts.

Many local authorities in Australia have 'second level' plans relating to organisational values. By this I mean they believe that values must be embedded in the behaviour of staff. They adopt a set of acceptable behaviours for staff, so that they know when they are enacting a value. Annual appraisal of staff requires demonstration of the values and behaviours to the satisfaction of a superior. Enactment of values is then tied to remuneration. In this way the values become coercive and restrictive in their application. Control can be more easily assumed when conflict is apparently absent. When staff agree and sign up to a set of values, and on the way to behave, then doing anything other than the leader's definition of what the values entail is not tolerated. Difficult conversations about the ambiguity in the work have no place. Used in this way, values statements paper over complexity and deny the opportunity to address it directly. True values create a dialectic that is never resolved. One way of destroying the dialectic is either total relativisation of values or imposing 'core' values as absolute.

The splitting of good and bad in this way makes thinking difficult. The shades of grey which in reality make up the moral ambiguity of the workplace are dispatched and it is hard to say anything contrary to the 'party line'; hard to think about the consequences of actions in any complex manner and hard to see all the possible fall out from specific actions.

It is paradoxical that on the one hand local authority CEOs can articulate the values behind their work in the sector and are keen to develop lists of values which distinguish them from profit making businesses, but they are still caught up in trying to control their environment by measuring and codifying the values. As one CEO told me,

*Before I arrived, the basic values had been developed, workshopped through council officers. But they say nothing. It's the four – integrity, teamwork, respect and so forth. But we are at stage two of the process now, which is what are the attitudes and behaviours that sit behind the values, both acceptable and unacceptable. Because people say, 'how do we know? What does it mean?' We are workshopping that with third-level managers.*

The CEO that I 'shadowed' for six months was frustrated in her attempts to 'drill down' the values throughout the organisation. She said the 'values are not getting past the third level of management'. She felt that middle managers were not seeing the bigger organisational picture, they were not enacting organisational values and they were not taking initiative. When I spoke to middle managers on the other hand, they felt that the leadership group did not embody the values in their day-to-day interactions with them, or support them in their difficulties with staff who report to them. Their view was that senior management took the credit from them for any success, but they kept the blame if things went wrong. At the same time, middle managers are pressured by staff who report to them, regarding the complex practicalities of attempting to put policies and programs in place which serve the organisational values. Here is what staff said about organisational values.

*The organisation says you are a valued member of staff, but if you have an OHS [occupational health and safety] issue you go from being a valued member of the organisation to a pariah... Sometimes values are upheld and sometimes not. Sometimes it comes adrift on the individual level.*

*Staff value other people, they talk about friendships, it's not, maybe, an organisational value, the organisation wants quality service to the community. Staff don't come into that value.*

There is a sense of demoralization for staff in these quotes. Perhaps they feel the organisation no longer stands for the values that attracted them to working in it. Organisational structures and goals interplay with individuals' own patterns of belief and unconscious imagery to either support or change their view of the world. If an organisation uses structures, values and mission to shore itself up against its perceived external enemies, it encourages a paranoid-schizoid response in its members: its typical splits and projections are also taken on by staff and they in turn interact with the organisational splits. The desire to have value statements is part of the defence against the irrationality and uncontrollability of life and in fact adds to the problem, because it buries difficult discussions and ambiguity, so that they become unspeakable.

Cummins (2002:111) argues that quality assurance mechanisms in universities function in much the same way: they provide 'comfort and reassurance that things are under control'. The desire to control leads to the need to quantify and be accountable for specific outcomes that leads in Cummins view to the creation of a process for reporting on that which is measured. It does not lead to in depth thinking about the purpose of the measures or if there is value in what is not captured by the measuring system.

## **Conclusion**

There are consequences to the discourse of scarcity; good things are seen as being in short supply and we are locked into deficit thinking. Deficit thinking evokes fear of failure and incapacity. We then overcompensate by writing value statements. There is no room in neoliberalism for the poetic imagination of symbol. The talisman of the private sector in pursuit of profit may be, perhaps, the dollar. But the symbols of the public sector are far richer; they are about community, place and time. For local government they are town halls, historical monuments, gardens, heritage buildings, Mayoral robes, plaques and honour rolls. Yet under the assault of neoliberalism, it is hard to speak about them as these symbols are diminished. The hollow symbols of neoliberalism don't nourish workers in the sector.

To truly act on values requires recognition of the fear, and vulnerability of doing so. When values are codified, advertised, measured and linked with performance pay they are a defence against facing the complexity of organisational life. I have called them talismans because of their connection with magical thinking. Value statements appear to function as talismans in the public sector against the 'evils' of the wider society. They represent a magical solution to the dilemmas we find ourselves in. They allow enterprises (in both sectors) to avoid thinking about workplaces and the broader society in any real complexity. Having no value statement at all or having shopping list value statements, without thought of their possible contradictions and complexities when enacted, creates the risk of unthought of/embedded social values impinging on what public institutions do because they simply copy the form from the private sector. Equally if the conflict between values remains unspoken and unacknowledged it can create a vacuum for these cultural values to enter and shape outcomes. A lack of control of the broader social system is linked with an over emphasis on surveillance and measurement without critical thought, the values are linked with behaviours and staff are measured against what is acceptable and not acceptable. Rather than thinking of value as imponderable, public sector institutions unthinkingly use the tools of a business model to 'prove' to the outside world that their actions match their words.

Values are a central aspect of the task of the public sector organisation, but they need to be liveable and achievable, and in their adoption, there needs to be an understanding that conflict and compromise form a part of life. Values in the public sector are embedded in the tasks of the organisation, but value statements don't add to the discussion of value. The public sector need not copy the private sector in writing 'shopping lists' of values, which are both hard to live up to and often contradictory in their application. This may well be done in the private sector to convince customers that there are socially acceptable values in the enterprise when such values are not immediately apparent (for example cigarette manufacturers).

Value statements as social defence mechanisms in local government have negative impacts on the organisation: they may be demoralising, as they are too hard to live up to. They may be devoid of meaning as the idea is simply copied from the private sector model of a good corporate citizen. They may be used punitively – adopted to share the responsibility and, therefore, the blame when compromises are inevitably made. They may serve to control staff and ensure they are loyal by linking values to promotion. In some cases, they may be the outward manifestation of a CEO's unhealthy desire to be seen as always upholding the right course of action. Alternatively, they may be the result of a backlash against the intrusion of business practices into the public sector – an attempt to display moral superiority.

While local government organisations do well to debate and explore the ethos of service, generating lists of values will foreclose this process, not facilitate it. I think the discussion of values is what knits people together and allows us to live with uncertainty. The value of fraternity is enhanced by entering into a collective discussion about what the value means to each of us.

People do want to talk about values with meaning. There is a sense of distaste in local government for the more regulatory aspects of neoliberalism in practice. My view in spending six months in one local government authority is that people do truly want to do their part to make the world a better place. They are trying to work together, yet within a system that makes cooperative action very difficult. Any alternative to the current ways of operating must embrace complexity and requires being able to live with uncertainty. Public sector leaders are not powerless in the face of the current orthodoxy and the opportunity exists to give voice to alternative ways of being in the world. We can de-mythologise the neoliberal worldview and return it to the ordinary world of human relations. Economic theories are, after all, just that – theories. In the long view of history climates shift, electorates' expectations alter and political pragmatism creeps in. Nations moved to autarkical (self sufficient) economies during the Great Depression – they might do so again (personal communication: Peter Gronn).

The first step is to declare that the public sector serves the common good and then open the matter for debate around a definition of the common good and how best to serve it. The Town Hall is the symbol of conversations between people and respect for the democratic process. The traditions of local government can be incorporated into the daily lives of workers and citizens. They become the embodiment of value. Local government needs to infuse its sense of purpose with long-term stewardship notions, not simply survival and accountability in the short term. If it does this it not only helps staff regain a sense of congruence between their own personal values and that of the organisation, but it helps to defend against the onslaught of neoliberalism and in fact gives a deeper sense of security to the citizenry, i.e 'local government is looking after us all for the long term, they are keeping us on track and preserving our sense of ourselves for future generations.' It is a creative life, as Winnicott says, to question and learn and engage in an active way with the world outside ourselves.

The Mezuzah is a powerful talisman still today in a modern industrial city probably for many reasons, but one at least is its connection to a story from the past that resonates with meaning. The story reminds the Jews that they did escape the oppression of Egypt. The memorial function of the Mezuzah is the key to its power. It symbolises connectedness and solidarity. It provides those who have it with a sense of trust and hope. It is a reminder for Jewish people of who they are, where they have come from, it tells a story and as such it has a symbolic value pointing to something bigger than each of us alone as individuals.

The public service has been well connected to its primary tasks in the past and can be so again. It can build hope and solidarity around a deep exploration of purpose. To be able to move to the depressive position, we must feel confident that the local government container can hold our anxieties. To provide this security the institution must be clear about its value infused task and stay in touch with the anxiety provoked by that task (Obholzer 1994:173). The assault of neoliberalism has caused the sector to lose its sense of story and history. Values statements that are technical and disembodied become part of the evil at work, but value statements that are the result of conversations about where we have come from and that remind us of who we are, like the Mezuzah, are then powerful symbols of our purpose and our common value. If the public sector can regain confidence in its own history and traditions then its work practices may then have something to offer a renewed private sector.

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