

Sorting out politics in 1,000 words

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I have been thinking quite a lot about business of late, and what makes it work. Based on my experience, a lot of people - including those running many businesses - don't seem too understand what they are selling, for example.

Let me use an example. When I was running an accountancy practice, I realised that we sold peace of mind to our clients. We didn't sell accounts, or tax return completion, or anything else of that sort to most of our clients. We sold them the knowledge that they could send all tax-related matters our way, safe in the knowledge that we would deal with everything on a timely basis and well within the law so that they would not be put at risk. That was what they wanted, and by selling people just that, we could charge more than average for the service that we supplied because we understood exactly what that core service was. You could sleep at night with us on your side: that was the message.

Of course, we required technical expertise.

Of course, we had to be good at what we did.

And, of course, we had to explain what we were doing - although we appreciated that most people would never read the small print, and so we put it all in appendices to letters (those were the days) in which the main body of the text only told the client what they really needed to know, such as when their next bill was due, and what it was, and how to pay it.

It was a winning formula.

How could you replicate that for government? Plenty of people reading this blog are interested in the details of what it does. We are willing to trawl over monetary and fiscal policy, the ins and outs of budgets, and much more.

But what do people really want from government? Most people just want peace of mind - the idea that government is there to look after the things that go wrong and to do a bit more besides.

To put it another way, they want to know that:

- * They will be cared for if they are sick
- * The same will be true for their families
- * Their children will be educated
- * If everything goes wrong, the state will provide them with a safety net
- * They will be safe and secure in their homes and in their country, but that means existential as well as physical risks, so climate change is in there
- * They will have a home
- * They'd like employment if they're able to work
- * They'd like protection or a pension if they can't

There may be a few other things, but that's most of it. In other words, people are willing to pay to pass the buck to government in exchange for security, and that's the deal into which they think they have entered.

If the government doesn't deliver peace of mind they'll get angry with it.

If it makes too much of a fuss whilst doing so, they might also get annoyed.

But if the government delivers those basic things they will more than willingly pay a premium price - but only if it does.

Of course, that does require that people have some comprehension of the alternative price that they might have to pay if the government option is not on the table, but since almost everyone knows that private medicine costs a lot more than the NHS, and private rented accommodation is dearer and worse than state-sector accommodation, understanding on these issues is not hard to establish. All parents of toddlers paying nursery fees really know just what comparative costs are.

So, we have, in that case, a simple list of things to do and an awareness that, deep down, people have a sense that the state is able to deliver value for money.

What, then, do you need to create to deliver this utopia? That's also not hard to work out.

You need managers who have to understand these two things.

And you need staff who they treat with respect and who are persuaded as a result to deliver these things - and most staff will do what most managers want if you treat them with respect.

Then, those staff members need the tools for the job, from decent workplaces to the right kit.

That's it, in essence. That is what the job of good government is when it comes down to it.

So why aren't we getting what we need? Again that is easy to explain.

First, we have managers (known as politicians) who hate the organisation they work for, and want to constrain its size whenever they are given the chance to do so, usually by undermining its services, staff or the provision of kit to make service delivery possible.

Second, we have demotivated staff who have been treated like fools (which they aren't) and who have been taken for granted (a cardinal sin) for decades, and who cannot, therefore, deliver what is required because they lack the direction and desire to do so because their managers (the politicians) never miss the chance to tell them they're rubbish.

And third, the required kit is not available.

So, we end up with poor public services and resentment at the levels of tax charged because the public is not getting what they deserve because, really rather bizarrely, our politicians seem to think that their main task is to deny the public what they need, and want, which they are willing to pay a premium price for if only they got it.

Sorting out politics is, in that case, really not very hard. We just need to get some people in charge who really believe in the delivery of public services and most of the rest will follow.

The problem is that right now politics is dominated by people who seem to hate public services. We just need to be rid of them.

It's really not that difficult to work out what is needed. Now, we just need people to do it.