

<b>MATTERS</b>	<b>NEW WORKING METHODS: INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION, INTEGRATED APPROACH, TRULY RESPECTING CLIENTS' WISHES</b>
<b>COUNTRY</b>	<b>THE NETHERLANDS</b>
<b>TITLE</b>	<b>TOWARDS CLIENT-CENTRED GOVERNMENT</b>
<b>ABSTRACT</b>	
<p>Two important problems for the public sector are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. government agencies still aren't professional enough. They don't communicate with one another. And they don't put enough stress on performance.</li> <li>2. and they aren't client-centered enough.</li> </ol> <p>This article focuses on the importance of more cooperation between governmental bodies and better listening to the wishes of clients.</p>	

### **FULL TEXT DOCUMENT**

#### **Introduction**

In September 2004 the 3<sup>rd</sup> Quality Conference for Public Administrations in the EU took place. It became clear that the public sector has to deal with two problems:

1. government agencies still aren't professional enough. They don't communicate with one another. And they don't put enough stress on performance.
2. and they aren't client-centred enough.

These problems have two important side effects. First, they harm a country's economic development and thus the EU's Lisbon Agenda. The member states are trying to set up a strong European economy focused on innovation. To succeed, a professional, client-centred public sector is needed. Second, these problems harm not only the economy. Much more importantly, they hurt the credibility of government and politicians.

#### **Causes of the current problems**

Last September the Netherlands and the EU member states organised the third Quality Conference for Public Administrations in the EU. Almost thirteen hundred officials attended, from EU member states and elsewhere. It was the largest European meeting ever held on improving quality in the public sector. It covered all fields of public services, from health care to the police to policymakers at ministries.

Many current projects were discussed at this successful conference ([www.3qconference.org](http://www.3qconference.org)). And they were all very innovative. So innovative, in fact, that no two were alike. Three leading academics analysed the conference and concluded: "the wheel is constantly being reinvented".

This is one reason there was not enough progress in improving public organisations: too little learning from one another.

The second reason is that officials say that they are focused on the public – but they often do not take account of what people actually need (they don't really listen).

The third and last reason for the lack of progress is that government agencies are not working together enough. It's what some people call a "silo culture" – meaning that organisations operate from inside their own separate towers.

## **1 What to do?**

Just like the private sector, government needs to introduce a form of “customising”. In the private sector this is easy to define. Making a mass product into something that is personal to an individual user. But for public organisations things are different, because they don’t have different services for everyone. In their case “customising” means paying extra attention to the design, delivery and presentation of services. Wherever possible, they should be guided by the wishes of our clients. But that doesn’t mean doing whatever a client wants.

It means that civil servants commit their selves to supplying certain services of a certain quality. And giving their clients rights also shows that the government respects them.

## **2 Two pillars**

This vision involves a new working method. Roughly speaking, it has two pillars.

The first pillar is internal cooperation and an integrated approach. It is designed to solve the problem of “silo culture”, which was mentioned earlier. And it focuses on organisational culture and leadership. Although difficult, a culture of cooperation has to be created.

When tackling the silos, innovators will probably meet with opposition; organisations always resist change. The solution lies mainly with the leaders, who should:

- lay stress on partnership
- but give professionals the room they need to break through the silos
- keep motivating staff
- encourage creativity
- but don’t allow the wheel to be reinvented
- let people learn from their mistakes
- and keep the organisation on its toes.

But it’s not just about internal cooperation and an integrated approach. At the end of the day it’s about better services – in other words, respecting clients’ wishes. This is the second pillar: involving clients in service provision.

Key to success is getting users actively involved. Then staff will see the importance of a client-centred approach much more quickly. So:

- organise client councils
- draw up questionnaires and monitor client satisfaction
- and draw up citizens’ charters. They give guarantees about what businesses and individuals can expect from a government agency.

British experience shows that the power of a citizens’ charter lies in the respect shown to public service users. In all traditional public service models, users have played a passive role. They needed something, and the government provided it. They were not partners, but recipients. To achieve success and better services, it is necessary to start respecting the clients’ wishes and giving them the chance to complain if they are unhappy. And citizens’ charters are perfect for that goal, because they give rights to the clients.

## **3 Conclusion**

There is a need for (1) more internal cooperation and an integrated approach, (2) and truly involving users in service provision. If done so, the government can help to create a society that gives businesses and individuals greater scope for personal development and more satisfaction.

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