Losing the faith: Public sector work and the erosion of career calling

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Abstract

This article tells the story of Dave, a welfare rights advisor who worked his way up to be Assistant Director of Social Services in a Midlands local authority. Dave joined the public sector with a sense of calling and a belief that local government could create positive social change. Over the next 25 years, however, Dave's calling was increasingly challenged as his job and the context in which he worked were transformed. This article focuses on the ways in which Dave navigated the system in an attempt to 'keep the faith', before eventually taking early retirement.

Introduction

There is something compelling about people who dedicate their working lives to a higher purpose. For them, work is not just about earning a living, or even about personal satisfaction or achievement. Rather, it is about making a difference to what matters to them, and is at the core of who they are and of what it means to them to be a person in the world. The term 'calling' is used here to describe this all-encompassing experience, 'unifying one's inward and outward life' (Progoff, 1986: 78), and associated notions of meaning and purpose, relationships and identity. But what happens when a person's sense of calling is under threat? This is the focus of Dave's story. It is a story of slowly and incrementally losing the faith.

Dave worked in English local authority social services departments for 25 years. During most of this time he was employed by Heartland County Council (HCC – a pseudonym), latterly as a senior

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manager[i]. Dave had been studying for a PhD when a chance conversation led him to take a temporary job in a benefits advice centre. The job opened his eyes to the realities of poverty and injustice. This was the mid-1970s, a period in which new structures and occupations were being established to address social inequality. Convinced that he must be part of this, Dave terminated his studies, and began his career in welfare rights. He worked in local authorities from 1977 to 2011, progressing from senior welfare rights worker to assistant director. Dave took voluntary early retirement in 2011. He was 58.

At first, Dave felt as one with his organization and his colleagues. This was the work he needed to be doing. The UK welfare state was established in the 1940s, and the social security benefits system was part of this. However, by the 1980s the system had become so complicated that people frequently failed to receive the support that they were eligible for. Welfare rights services were established to offer advice on benefits and ensure that people got their full entitlements. Dave strongly subscribed to the philosophy of welfare rights, and at first the local authorities in which he worked shared his commitments and aspirations.

However, by the late 1980s, under Margaret Thatcher's conservative government, social and political attitudes had begun to shift. With the advent of new public management in the early 1990s, through modernization and the 'big society', this ideological scaffolding was systematically eroded. Following the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent austerity agenda, Dave felt that the principles that had underpinned the welfare state had finally been obliterated. In his last two years at HCC, he oversaw the dismantling of the service he had been building for a quarter of a century. The over-riding imperative was to 'get rid of the waste'. Dave accepted voluntary early retirement in 2011.

In the academic literature, calling has come in and out of fashion (Weber, 1930; Progoff, 1986; Bunderson and Thompson, 2009; Duffy and Dik, 2013; Conklin, 2012; Elangovan, Pinder and McLean, 2010; Madden, Bailey and Kerr, 2015). Since the early 2000s the concept has seen a renaissance, maybe because the unsettling of long-established structures and emergence of new types of

organization and employment relationships have given particular urgency to questions about what work means and how people experience it. The concept of calling taps into many of these concerns.

The meaning of calling is widely contested. Bunderson and Thompson (2009) suggest two broad approaches: 'neoclassical' and 'modern'. The former draws on Weber's (1930) notion of being called by God to do moral, socially valued work. It combines a person's profound attachment to a work domain, a commitment to work that serves a purpose beyond the self, and the idea that people are beckoned to a particular type of work, as if by 'external summons'.

The idea of 'external summons' is interesting. Originally associated with a higher order being and used to describe the work of monks and the clergy, its reach is now much wider, including family duty, societal imperatives, political commitments, and even transcendent, but not necessarily religious, obligations (Novak, 1996). In our increasingly secular society, this view of calling can still be a powerful form of discipline, creating a sense of purpose and structure that extends beyond the individual and their own career aspirations, and beyond the boundaries of the work organization.

In the literature, 'external summons' plays out in some different ways. In their work on zookeepers, Bunderson and Thompson (2009) describe working with animals as part of their respondents' 'hardwiring': something they were born to do. In contrast, the sense of calling highlighted by Conklin's environmentalists is less 'biological' and more political: 'participants saw their work as 'urgently necessary in the world' (Conklin, 2012: 306). These respondents sought to challenge the status quo and to affect lasting change.

Modern approaches to calling, in contrast, often lack this wider sense of purpose and transcendence, and focus more on the individual, their purpose in life and the idea that this can, in part, be realised through engagement in work (Dobrow, 2013). Scholars taking this approach often use psychological frameworks to investigate people's understandings of calling, where it comes

from, and how it relates to concepts like satisfaction, commitment, prosocial work behaviour, work centrality and orientation (Duffy and Dik, 2013).

Dave's story is redolent of the neoclassical approach. Beyond his desire to build a satisfying and personally meaningful career, Dave describes his working life as part of something bigger and more profound. Motivated by political commitments rather than biological destiny, Dave is more akin to Conklin's environmentalists than Bunderson and Thompson's zookeepers. Through his welfare rights work, his connections with like-minded others, and his wider political engagement, he sought to build a better, fairer society. From his chance exposure to inequality and injustice, he saw no alternative but to follow this path.

In their 2013 review of research on calling, Duffy and Dik identify the need for greater attention to time. To date researchers have examined how a person's sense of calling evolves over time in relation to other variables such as satisfaction, self-efficacy (Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas, 2011; Elangovan, Pinder and McLean, 2010), social comfort and engagement (Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas, 2012) and planning and well-being outcomes (Hirschi and Hermann, 2012; 2013). However, such work is often limited by its lack of attention to the dynamic contexts in which calling evolves. This is problematic because in the neo-classical view at least, context is embedded in the very concept of calling itself. Far from simply being a benign backdrop on which a person enacts their calling, the context frames its possibilities, and its realisation.

There is a more limited stream of research that provides in-depth insights into particular occupational groups: environmentalists, zookeepers, priests (Bunderson and Thompson, 2009; Conklin, 2012; Madden et al., 2015). A key element in this work is how ideology infuses a person's sense of calling, such that their sense of mission, purpose and identity become inextricably linked to wider frameworks of thinking and acting. In this way, 'the successes of their occupational

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community in pursuing this ideology become personal successes" (Bunderson and Thompson, 2009: 40). From this perspective ideology, at the level of society as well as occupations and/or organizations, is a dynamic construct, entangled and implicated in the processes through which people construct themselves and through work and career (Mumby, 2004). Dave's story is part of this continuing conversation.

A significant theme within this literature is how calling seeps into and integrates different spheres of a person's life such that their work and personal communities become almost inseparable. This was certainly the case for Dave. Indeed, as the service was increasingly undermined, this bond grew even more important. In his words: 'we end(ed) up being like Millwall fans… they all hate us and we don't care'. The more embattled they felt, the stronger the sense of us and them.

Intuitively, the connotations of calling are resoundingly positive, with apparent benefits for people themselves, their organizations and the world. The beginning of Dave's story conveys this sense of belonging and possibility. But as Bunderson and Thompson point out, this morally charged, profoundly responsible and passionate way of thinking about and behaving at work can be a 'painfully double edged sword' (2009:36). Researchers have shown how it can lead to exploitation, as people work beyond reasonable expectations (Elangovan et al., 2010); feelings of alienation when they are asked to do things outside of their explicit interests and commitments (Conklin, 2012); a sense of moral failure when things do not turn out as expected (Thompson and Bunderson, 2003; Bunderson and Thompson, 2009); and to entrenched conservatism (Madden et al., 2015).

Certainly, there are elements of this 'dark side' in Dave's transcript. He vividly describes his feelings of betrayal when corporate missions were rewritten, and services recast and ultimately removed in line with changing agendas. The sense of shifting organizational requirements eroding one's beliefs and commitments will be familiar to diverse workers, from welfare rights officers to teachers, academics and health professionals (Baines, 2011). However, while this situation resounds

empirically, it is less well-rehearsed theoretically. Notably, we have limited understanding of what people do when their sense of calling is undermined by organizational and occupational change – when they feel themselves 'losing the faith'. This is an important dimension of Dave's story.

In the course of his account, Dave's speaks of how he manoeuvred within changing agendas to maintain his sense of purpose. Four key approaches emerge. First, he explains how he sought to integrate personal and work dimensions of life, such that he saw little distinction between these spheres. Although over the years he felt that his welfare rights work was compromised, his lifestyle and commitments outside of the workplace supported and enabled him to hold on to his ideals at work (Baines, 2011).

Second, Dave described how, through successive promotions, he was able to influence the strategic direction of his services as well as day-to-day operations. Conklin (2012) asks whether the modern idea of career, with its emphasis on upward advancement, is at odds with the notion of calling. It is a provocative question which Dave considered during his interview. He spoke of how colleagues charged him with 'selling out' when they learned of his promotion, and of his discomfort when he found himself defending corporate decisions he did not agree with. However, Dave's increasing seniority meant that he was in a stronger position to shape his department's agenda in line with his commitments, and to fend off changes that he found unpalatable.

Third, throughout his career Dave found ways to navigate around the system, finding spaces within changing structures in his attempts to 'keep the faith'. He had always made a point of developing knowledge in novel and emerging areas. This meant that as things changed, he became an indispensable resource. As the organisational 'Mr Fixit', Dave was able to choose projects that he valued, and that were consistent with his aspirations. Whilst these processes of negotiation and navigation may be familiar to readers (Davenport and Leitch, 2005), the literature on calling has yet to investigate these micro-adjustments, or their implications.

Fourth, permeating Dave's transcript was a story of resistance and solidarity (Baines, 2011). As the welfare state came under increasing attack, Dave joined with other public sector employees to campaign against the challenge. Outside work, Dave was an active member of the Labour Party, and lived in a community with like-minded people. Over the years this community proved to be a source of solidarity, and to an extent enabled Dave to hold on to his ideals, despite his realization of the chasm that was emerging between his values and those of his workplace.

Dave joined the public sector because he thought it was a context in which he felt he could live out his calling (Baines, 2011; Thompson and Bunderson, 2003). Over the ensuing decades, this context was reshaped through a raft of bureaucratic and technological changes. But despite these challenges, Dave found ways of holding on to his ideals; Through the small adjustments highlighted above, he incrementally manoeuvred to 'keep the faith'.

The desire to hold on to his sense of calling does not mean that the concept is inevitably conservative. Indeed, the adjustments Dave made were certainly not intended to keep structures and practices as they were. Rather, he acknowledged deficiencies in the services, and recognised the value of some of the new initiatives. However, he was troubled by the continual undermining of the underlying principles of the welfare state, the erosion of social ideals in the name of neo-liberal efficiency and the ever-widening gap in structures of opportunity.

After the 2008 financial crash and the imposition of the austerity agenda, Dave and other senior managers were charged with dismantling the services that they had been building for almost three decades. Far from making a contribution to the cause, Dave was asked to disassemble it. He no longer believed he could affect positive change in that context. It came as no surprise that when he was offered early retirement, he took it.

Dave's story

I got the job at City People's Rights with the intention of writing my PhD at the same time, but I

didn't write one more word from that day on. From the first day I thought 'Bloody hell, there's a world out here that I didn't even really know'. I'd had a fairly sheltered, middle class upbringing in Hertfordshire and the sociology degree I'd done hadn't addressed issues around poverty and deprivation in a very big way. So, I was literally 'This is what I ought to be doing.'

When the funding ran out at the advice centre I needed to get another job. I thought 'I want to carry on being a welfare rights worker', and ended up getting a job in New Town. I liked the job. It was a very solid Labour council and I joined the Labour party. I think generally amongst the people who got into social services in the '70s there was a much more political dimension to the work than there is now. Now It's more difficult to see how you can achieve any kind of political ambitions in a local authority, whereas in the '70s we thought there were opportunities to actually combat deprivation and poverty. It was an exciting time. Back then local authorities were a powerful force for change. And there seemed to be a way to work, to make a career, in line with these principles.

Negotiating calling in a challenging context

In '79 Margaret Thatcher was elected. It was nothing compared to what we see now, but then it seemed like there was an attack on benefits and on people. In those circumstances, welfare rights seemed like a radical thing to do and it seemed if you were a left-wing person like I was and you were in the Labour party, it was a way of living out your ideals in your job. I didn't see any distinction between my life and my work. I always carried the idea that you shouldn't really distinguish between your private life and your work life. You couldn't have a job that didn't reflect your morality and your ethics. So I always worked long hours and I'd work in the evenings. I didn't really regard it as overtime because I was committed to what I was doing.

However my wife and I didn't really want to stay living in New Town, so in '82 I came to HCC as a senior welfare rights officer to help set up the service. We had pretty much a blank page. It was a new service and we were seen as the experts. Becoming more senior and knowing more than

anyone else was a real advantage in the local authority. You had an opportunity to do things. We did all kinds of stuff to promote people's knowledge and understanding of benefits and to kind of get information about benefits out there.

In 87 I left HCC to run the Longlands County Council (LCC) welfare rights service, and did that for seven years. In that period all the community care legislation was introduced and the Community Care Act came in. I was an adviser to the team that was implementing that Act. So it took me out of the welfare rights sphere into mainstream social services. That was the point at which I became a 'policy person'. I always felt that once I became manager and was taking the money of a manager, I had to be part of the organization. You have to defend some of its decisions even though you don't necessarily always agree with the way it behaves. So internally you might argue against a particular policy or decision, but you wouldn't necessarily in public. This wasn't always easy, but I did feel that as I got more senior, I had greater ability to influence what was happening.

A year later I moved back to HCC in a more general kind of policy, 'Mr Fix It' kind of role, eventually becoming Assistant Director. In a way I made myself indispensable. This meant that despite the changes, I had a lot of control over my work. The thing about doing welfare rights is that you get to learn about not only benefit advice, but you get to learn about employment law, you get to learn about housing and housing law because people are often getting evicted, so you get to know quite a lot about people's rights over a broad range of areas and that gives you, and you have to be quite good at maths because you have to be able to calculate people's entitlements and stuff. So I was able to work across lots of different projects in local authorities, and could move around different types of projects quite flexibly. In spite of the waves of change that were introduced with increasing frequency and magnitude, my rather loose job description meant that I had the freedom to introduce new things. So that helped me in the sense of coping and dealing with changes. I could avoid the bits of the local authority that were moving in ways I didn't like, and navigate around the areas where I didn't want to work.

When I came into local government in 1978 and through most of my career I worked for councils that were clearly opposed to national government, so actually it was okay to be critical of national policies. In fact, in the early days as a welfare rights worker we reveled in the fact that the Tory government hated welfare rights workers, particularly when Thatcher got in and had a particular disdain for welfare rights workers who were 'helping scroungers'. I remember making T-shirts that we used to wear to play up things that Tory ministers had said about people like us. It was almost like a badge of honour that you were disliked by The Sun. You sometimes end up being like Millwall fans – you know, 'They all hate us and we don't care!' The whole notion of your identity in an environment which by and large perceives you in a negative way is interesting. You certainly don't get your sense of self from reading the papers – or you do, but in an inverted way.

This sense of resistance and solidarity carried me through the constant undermining of the social welfare agenda. In your private life you tend to know other people who work in public service. Where I used to live practically every other person was a probation officer, social worker or a teacher. I suppose that meant that in your private life you didn't have to put up with people constantly saying 'Why do you do that?' There was a shared commitment and a shared view that you were misunderstood by the rest of the world.

Bureaucracy, technology and the steady erosion of calling

In the late '90s when New Labour came in, there was a whole plethora of requirements to produce plans and a lot of it was ticking boxes. My view is that the shift was first and foremost technological – not ideological. It was almost entirely down to the invention of email and the ability of central government to micro-manage local government. New Labour came in on the back of the explosion of Microsoft. I mean it sounds crazy, but I think that without the technology, New Labour couldn't have done what it did in terms of imposing targets on local government and the NHS. It's the notion that you start off by ticking boxes, but eventually the culture starts to change. So what I'm saying is that the technology went hand-in-hand with the ideology, and gradually, over time, our original

sense of purpose was reconfigured in some pretty radical ways. But, because it was incremental and because we were so busy with our day-to-day jobs, sometimes the change was almost imperceptible.

So over that decade there was a massive change in people's way of working and that really transformed the way that local government operated. It was an opportunity for central government to control, which is what it always wanted to do. As I said before, I could see the positives. But it didn't turn out like that. Instead, what happened was that New Labour created an architecture that made it easy for the Tories, when they got in, to push forward their new ideological agenda.

During that time, I began to lose my faith. When I joined local government I saw it as a force for positive change. But what happened for me, and for other people, is that under New Labour it went sour. I'd been an active member of the party for a long time and initially I was absolutely ecstatic at there being a Labour government with a progressive agenda. But after a few years it seemed to go wrong, and at that point I began to lose, not my innocence, but there was a sense that my eyes were more open to the limitations of what local government could actually do.

But it's not like I was only wedded to the past, or that my view was excessively nostalgic. Some of the changes were actually necessary. For example, previously we had had very poor record keeping. In the past money was spent and outcomes weren't always evaluated properly. In that sense, greater accountability was probably a good thing. The problem is that now you'll find fantastic case records, but not necessarily the same opportunities for doing good things for people because there is such a bureaucracy to negotiate with.

Losing the faith: the end of calling

Since then the whole programme has been dismantled. Everything I did under welfare rights is gone now. They got rid of the welfare rights service and the whole Supporting People programme is gone. You just have to accept that you did what you did at the time and it was good while it lasted, but

that nothing [lasts forever]. You just have to accept that nothing is permanent.

It was extremely upsetting. It was personally upsetting and what was very depressing about it was that also in that last year before I left I was a member of the senior management team, so I was actually actively involved in coming up with plans to make the savings. You know, there was never an option that we didn't make the savings. There was a Conservative administration who were ideologically committed to reducing the state. The service I ran was an obvious target. I had a budget of £25m and by the time I left that had been reduced to about £12m and now it's down to about £3m. And I've heard that since I've gone all that money has effectively been cut out of the budget or transferred to shore up other budgets. It was very upsetting. I felt hurt that local government services were being entirely undervalued by both the government and the public at large. We were regarded as unhelpful, inefficient and wasteful. But the real people that suffered were the people out there, not me.

I think most people who came into local government in the '70s with a commitment and agenda for change feel that local government has shifted in ways that they didn't want. It's the same in other public services: teachers and GPs would tell you the same, and police officers probably would. There's something about the notion of commitment to local government, you work in it as a vocation. But now the notion of vocational public service has become passé through 'managerialising' and 'targetising' the service. What's gone is the notion of voluntary effort and endeavour that went alongside what you were being paid for. There would have been no welfare rights service created in the '80s if the people setting it up had just turned up at nine o'clock and left at five. It came to be because people actually *lived* the creation. Those services don't happen when people follow rules. You have to have real dedication and commitment. That's impossible to achieve in an environment which is all about targets set from on high, and action plans on Excel spreadsheets.

To me it seems much less likely that people nowadays go into social work because of a desire to

make significant political change. They might still want to do something good for the community, and may well want to work in an organisation that isn't dedicated to profit. But I wouldn't expect them to see their role as making a big difference. I think very often people end up in social work for other kinds of reasons – because they think they want to work with people, because they weren't very good at maths, or because it still provides a relatively secure pension.

The job of a local government officer is to work for whoever is in power, but I didn't want to and I had a choice. I chose to leave at that point because I could no longer see myself in a job that I didn't feel really committed to. I was having to work closely with politicians who I fundamentally disagreed with and didn't like. It was time to go.

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New York: Routledge Classics.

[i] Dave was a respondent in a study of senior managers in a social services department who took voluntary early retirement in 2011. Dave and the first author were acquaintances, living in the same neighbourhood and with mutual friends. It was Dave who facilitated contact with the other participants in the study. A notable feature of the study was respondents' engagement throughout, including not only participation in interviews and focus groups, but also through email conversations. Some even commented on drafts of papers emerging from the project. Dave was one of these. As he explained in his account, after university Dave started a PhD and was considering a career in academia. He still has a keen interest in academic work, and was happy to participate in the On The Front Line project.