

New development: degrees of relationality

A ladder for public service design

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IMPACT

Calls for relational public services often set them against transactional public services. That false dichotomy obscures legitimate variation. A clean transaction may be exactly right; a warm encounter may leave surrounding rules and power untouched; and citizen action is different from a larger institutional partnership. This article offers a practitioner-derived ladder of degrees of relationality, running from specified provision and scripted bureaucracy through basic relationality, Good Help, coordinated provision, changes to system conditions, place-based operation and citizen space. The ladder is a heuristic, not a maturity model. Its practical use is to make the proposed change explicit, distinguish better service contact from institutional or civic change, and help public services combine different degrees deliberately.

ABSTRACT

The emerging relational public services literature often describes reform as a move from the transactionalism of New Public Management towards relationship-centred provision. The contrast has explanatory force, but it can harden into a false dichotomy. Public services need excellent transactions as well as relational judgement, coordinated support, institutional learning, place governance and citizen action. This article presents a practitioner-derived ladder of degrees of relationality. It distinguishes specified provision, scripted bureaucracy, basic relationality, Good Help as bounded agency-building, coordinated provision, changing system conditions, place operation, co-governance and citizen space; authority and enforcement are treated as a separate register, with discipline operating through police action, prosecution, contractual enforcement or social exclusion. The ladder is offered as a heuristic rather than a validated scale, maturity model or universal sequence. It compresses several dimensions and should be read with checks for health and fit. Used cautiously, it gives practitioners and researchers a clearer language for specifying what relational reform changes and for problematising a simple New Public Management-to-relational transition.

KEYWORDS Relational public services; transactional public services; New Public Management; public-service design; participation; place-based working; citizen power; heuristic

From a binary to degrees

Relational public services have emerged as a substantial strand of reform and research. The field includes relational public administration, the relational and social state, Human Learning Systems, community power, service design and place-based practice (Cooke and Muir, 2012; Mackenzie, 2021; Bartels and Turnbull, 2020; Wilson et al., 2024; Wilson et al., 2025). Much of this work responds to New Public Management: disaggregated services, contractual and vertical accountability, performance targets and the reduction of public value to what institutions can specify and count (Hood, 1991; Kieboom and van der Bijl-Brouwer, 2025).

That diagnosis can be turned too easily into a transition story: transactional public services belong to the old regime; relational public services belong to the next. The binary is too blunt. Paying the correct benefit, booking an appointment, issuing a licence or obtaining a clear answer should usually be quick, dependable and low-burden. A prolonged personal conversation about a straightforward request is not an improvement. Formal rules, universal entitlements and reviewable decisions also protect citizens from arbitrary or unequal treatment.

The reverse error is just as common. An encounter can be warm, continuous and attentive while the person still has to navigate fragmented eligibility, repeat assessments and conflicting organisations. A partnership can integrate provision while remaining closed to what citizens are trying to achieve. A community initiative can be described as empowering while public bodies withdraw support and transfer risk. 'Relational' does not by itself tell us what has changed.

Part of the difficulty is that the term names several different things. It can refer to the quality of an encounter, continuity with a practitioner, the composition of capabilities around a person, learning that changes an organisation, collaboration across a place, citizen participation, or the political relationship between institutions and

the public. These meanings are connected, but they are not interchangeable (Bartels and Turnbull, 2020; Kieboom and van der Bijl-Brouwer, 2025). A service can move on one of them and remain unchanged on the others.

This article develops a practitioner-derived ladder of degrees of relationality to make those differences discussable. The ladder began as a device for public-service design and leadership conversations. It replaces a binary with a set of landmarks, each describing a recognisable relationship between citizens, practitioners, services and public institutions. The next section introduces the ladder and its rungs. A following section sets out its limits as a heuristic, drawing on critiques of other ladder models. The final sections explain how it can be used in design, evaluation and research. The proposal is conceptual and practice-derived; it has not been validated as a measurement scale.

The ladder of relationality

Figure 1 presents the ladder. Its organising idea is a widening degree of relationality: moving upwards, the citizen's situation and agency have greater capacity to alter the response, the surrounding conditions, governance and, at the open end, who originates action. The scope widens at the same time, from provision and encounter to organisation, place and civic association. That compression gives the ladder its practical clarity. It also creates limitations addressed later.



How to read the ladder

Three rules matter. First, the numbers do not form a moral ranking. The appropriate degree depends on public purpose and context. A clean transaction may be better than an unnecessary relationship; open-ended engagement may be essential where the situation cannot be understood in advance. Second, several degrees coexist in the same service and sometimes in the same contact. A co-governed place still needs reliable payments, lawful decisions and well-designed routine processes. Third, higher degrees do not abolish the capabilities below them. They add room for judgement, composition, learning or citizen action. A system that can respond openly should still be able to make simple things simple.

Provision and encounter: levels –1 to 2

Level –1, specified provision, describes a standard offer designed around a general public purpose. Its strength is dependable, equitable and low-burden provision within a known range. Universal services, entitlements and common standards often belong here. The failure appears when the specification substitutes for purpose or relevant variation: 'we met the standard' becomes a complete answer even when the result does not work for the citizen.

Level 0, scripted bureaucracy, organises routine demand through categories, scripts and workflow. Healthy scripting makes straightforward transactions fair, transparent and consistent. It reduces avoidable effort and prevents every citizen having to negotiate afresh. Its characteristic failure is to make institutional categories the price of access. People translate a complicated life into the service menu, carry information between providers and return when the script has resolved the case administratively but not practically.

Level 1, basic relationality, begins when the person's account can alter the response within a bounded task. Staff listen at the point of contact, use judgement, resolve what they can and treat contact as intelligence about the service. Discretion becomes legitimate rather than hidden. This can still remain shallow. Listening may be performative, judgement may depend on exceptional staff, or the organisation may offer a better conversation while its measures, thresholds and hand-offs remain fixed.

Level 2, Good Help, changes the purpose of the helping relationship. It is bounded agency-building: support develops the person's sense of purpose, self-efficacy and practical capacity to act within the situation at hand, while still providing real help (Khan et al., 2018). This can include strengthening their ability to undertake some of the practical 'shadow work' surrounding a service or life change. The boundary matters. It does not make avoidable administrative or integration work created by fragmented provision their responsibility, nor does it alter the surrounding conditions. The danger is responsibilisation: the language of agency becomes withdrawal, blame or a subtler demand for compliance. Good Help therefore requires both respect for the person's agency and willingness to carry legitimate public responsibility.

Composition and institutional learning: levels 3 and 4

Level 3, coordinated provision, composes several capabilities around one situation over time. Continuity matters because needs and purposes interact, and because the work of joining the system otherwise falls to the citizen, family or one practitioner. Coordination at this degree is more than referral or co-location. Someone or some team can hold the whole pattern and mobilise relevant expertise. Its failure is the hero navigator: a skilled worker makes a fragmented system usable for individuals while the thresholds, incentives and information arrangements that create the fragmentation remain untouched.

Level 4, changing the conditions, makes learning from recurring situations consequential. Rules, measures, money, eligibility, data, commissioning and organisational boundaries can change in response to what frontline work reveals. This is the point at which relational practice becomes institutional learning rather than an accommodation made by practitioners. Its failure is policy theatre or technocratic redesign: the institution coordinates more tightly or extends its reach without becoming more answerable to the effects experienced by citizens.

Place and citizen power: levels 5, 5+ and 6

Level 5, a place operating system, locates shared authority, resource flows, conflict resolution and learning across a meaningful geography. It gives place-based working an operating form rather than leaving it as a partnership aspiration. The risk is place managerialism. A larger institutional partnership can reproduce the same vertical silos, or create a new centre which is easier for organisations to govern but no more open to citizens.

Level 5+, co-governed place, marks a further change in power. Citizens have real decision rights within place governance, through arrangements such as participatory budgeting, citizen-defined measures or shared control of learning. This is more than consultation or co-production inside an institutionally chosen frame. It remains vulnerable to decorative participation and capture by people with more time, confidence, status or access.

Level 6, citizen space, treats citizens in association as originators of action: family members, neighbours, residents and democratic participants rather than service users assembled by institutions. Public bodies become allies, contributors and guarantors of rights, redistribution and statutory duties (McKnight, 1995; Russell, 2020; Russell and McKnight, 2022; Watters, 2026). Citizen space is not simply a bigger version of place-based governance. Place is a territorial scope; citizen space is a source of agency and legitimacy. Its dangers are romanticising community, reproducing local exclusion and using civic language to offload public responsibility.

Authority and enforcement

Authority and enforcement sit below the dotted line because they are a separate register rather than an immature relationship. Public services sometimes have to constrain, compel or protect through law and public mandate. Safeguarding, taxation, emergency powers and criminal justice cannot be recast as voluntary collaboration. Authority may be used at any degree on the ladder. Vibert's account helps distinguish a progression in the means of discipline: from police action, through prosecution, to contractual enforcement and, at the most socially distributed end, social exclusion (Vibert, 2014). The vertical does not disappear along that progression. It changes from direct command and sanction to setting, authorising and protecting the legal, contractual and associational conditions through which conduct is regulated. Healthy authority is explicit, lawful, proportionate, reviewable and constrained by rights, whatever form it takes. Its pathology is domination, or coercion concealed in the language of help, contract, participation or belonging.

A useful simplification

Ladder metaphors attract justified criticism. Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation gained its force by making power visible, but later work showed what a single vertical sequence can lose. It can imply that every situation should move upward, treat roles as fixed, reduce several forms of power and knowledge to one dimension, and understate the quality of the process and the setting in which participation occurs (Tritter and McCallum, 2006; Cornwall, 2008; Collins and Ison, 2009). The same cautions apply here.

The degrees-of-relationality ladder compresses at least three distinctions. It combines the form of response with the scope at which change is held. Levels 1 to 4 largely concern what a service or organisation can learn and alter; levels 5 to 6 concern territorial governance and civic agency. It also says little about the architecture of accountability. More discretion and open response need answerability for effects across the person's situation, alongside vertical accountability for law, mandate and resources. Finally, the position shown by a rung says neither whether the arrangement is well enacted nor whether it suits the purpose.

A fuller diagnostic could separate those dimensions. This article keeps the ladder because simplification is part of its use. A heuristic earns its keep when it makes a recurring distinction easier to see and act on, while leaving its own limits visible. The rungs should therefore be read as landmarks, not empirical stages, fixed organisational types or a universal development path.

Health and fit

Two checks accompany any use of the ladder. 'Health' asks whether the degree is enacted competently, lawfully and equitably. Every degree has a healthy form and a pathology: standard provision can be dependable or indifferent; Good Help can build self-efficacy or offload responsibility; relational judgement can be responsive or arbitrary; coordination can support a life or become surveillance; citizen space can build common power or reproduce exclusion. 'Fit' asks whether the degree matches the public purpose and situation. Position, health and fit are separate judgements.

This prevents the ladder becoming a maturity model. A payment system at level 0 may be healthy and well fitted. A complex family situation handled through the same script may be badly fitted even if the transaction is efficient. A level 3 team may support people well but need level 4 change when the same institutional failure recurs. A level 6 initiative may still require dependable level –1 provision and lawful authority. Higher is not automatically better. A system unable to move between degrees, however, will repeatedly force different situations through the same form.

Using the ladder

The ladder can be used at three moments. In diagnosis, it asks what degree is actually present rather than what the programme calls itself. In design, it specifies the intended change: more judgement at contact, bounded agency-building, composition across capabilities, alteration of institutional conditions, place-wide authority, citizen decision rights or citizen-originated action. In evaluation, it separates improvement at one degree from claims about another. Better relationships with practitioners do not by themselves demonstrate system change; more integrated governance does not by itself demonstrate citizen power.

Five questions keep the discussion concrete:

1. What degree is visible in practice, and where does the current arrangement stop?
2. What role does the citizen occupy: recipient, case, contributor, partner, decision-maker or originator?
3. What is allowed to change: the interaction, the response, the mix of capabilities, institutional conditions, place governance or the initiating purpose?
4. What protects rights, equity and public accountability at this degree, and what is its characteristic failure?
5. Does this degree fit the purpose and situation, and which other degrees must coexist with it?

The ladder can also support research. Its categories can be tested for clarity and reliability; cases can examine movement between degrees; and outcome studies can ask whether changes in encounter, coordination, institutional learning or governance have different effects on citizen effort, equity, trust, cost and staff experience. Such work may show that the ladder needs fewer rungs, different labels or a different geometry. That is a productive test of a practitioner heuristic.

Conclusion

Relational public services cannot be understood as the opposite of transactional public services. Public systems need good transactions, relational judgement, Good Help that builds self-efficacy, coordinated capability, institutional learning, place governance, citizen power and lawful authority. The question is which form is present, what it permits to change and whether it fits the purpose.

The ladder offers a simple language for those choices. It distinguishes a better encounter from a changed organisation, a place partnership from citizen power, and lawful authority from low relationality. It also loses context, blends several dimensions and can invite a false idea of ascent. Used with explicit checks for health and fit, those weaknesses are manageable.

The aim is not to move every service to level 6. It is to build public systems able to use several degrees deliberately: make simple things simple, preserve judgement where variation matters, join capability around lives when required, let repeated failure change institutional conditions, and recognise when citizens should originate and govern collective action.

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