

New development: what the boundary cannot carry alone

The organisational conditions for relational public services

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IMPACT

The ladder of degrees of relationality distinguishes routine transaction, bounded judgement, agency-building, coordinated support, institutional learning, place governance and citizen action. This companion article asks whether the organisation behind the encounter can sustain the degree being sought. It offers a two-axis diagnostic: form of response and scope of holding, checked for health and fit. It then identifies four 'rails' that the frontline cannot supply alone: authority and supervision; information and measurement; funding and risk; and governance that permits consequential learning. Open relational work without wider holding becomes heroism, abandonment or a protected exception. Authority and capability must move towards demand, while accountability for effects and learning travels across the life of the situation and can alter rules, resources and sometimes the task itself.

ABSTRACT

A relational encounter can improve a person's experience while leaving the organisation behind it substantially unchanged. This article develops the organisational architecture omitted from a companion ladder of degrees of relationality. It begins with demand as a signal shaped by contact, eligibility and service categories, and proposes a default match between predictable, high-variation, specialist and open 'help me' demand and corresponding forms of response. It then separates the form of response from the scope at which sense-making, capability, uncertainty, resources and risk are held. Position on those axes does not determine quality: health is judged through good-enough holding, neither capture nor neglect, while fit asks whether form and scope match the situation. The article identifies a strategy ceiling above which sit rules, measures, budgets, contracts and political choices that the encounter cannot change alone. Four organisational 'rails' must cross that ceiling: authority and supervision; information and measurement; funding and risk; and governance for consequential learning. Digital platforms and AI may support this architecture or harden earlier categories. The result is a practical diagnostic for making relational work sustainable rather than dependent on exceptional people.

KEYWORDS Relational public services; demand; discretion; horizontal accountability; organisational learning; indirect value; public-service design; place-based working

A relational encounter is not yet a relational system

The ladder of degrees of relationality distinguishes several changes that are often collapsed into one label: specified provision, routine transaction, bounded judgement, Good Help, coordinated support, institutional learning, place operation, co-governance and citizen action (Taylor and Boxer, 2026). Its simplification is useful. It also leaves a second problem exposed. A service can ask a practitioner to work at a more open degree while keeping authority, measures, budgets and risk inside a closed institutional frame.

At that point the apparent advance is carried by the worker. They listen, translate, bend rules, join organisations, absorb uncertainty and protect the citizen from the ordinary machinery. This may improve a life. It does not mean the organisation has acquired the same capability. When the worker leaves, sponsorship ends or pressure rises, the earlier form returns.

This article develops the organisational part of the diagnostic that the ladder deliberately compresses. A companion paper on asymmetric demand explains why demand-in-context cannot always be inferred from supply categories (Boxer and Taylor, 2026a). Another examines why institutions privately accommodate what should become public learning (Boxer and Taylor, 2026b). The present contribution specifies what must be designed behind the encounter if relational work is not to depend on heroism.

The article starts with demand and the choice of response. It then separates the form of that response from the scope at which it is held, and distinguishes position, health and fit. The main section identifies the strategy ceiling and four organisational rails. The final section turns the argument into a six-question diagnostic.

Start with demand, not the service

Several established approaches turn attention away from the internal service catalogue and towards people's purposes and contexts of use. Demand analysis starts with what people are trying to do at the point of contact; service design studies practices and experience; public-service ecosystem work locates value in use across several actors rather than inside one provider (Seddon, 2003, 2008; Wetter-Edman et al., 2014; Osborne et al., 2022).

'Presenting demand' is a lagging and edited signal. Need arises in a life and place. It may be anticipated, prevented, met informally, hidden, intensified or translated into a service category before it appears in administrative data. Forms, eligibility questions, channels, scripts, assessments and referrals do not merely record reality. They transduce it: a lived situation is recoded into the categories, data and workflow through which the institution can act (Kress, 2010). Some aspects become actionable. Others disappear or change meaning.

Demand is also rarely one thing. A situation may require several capabilities to be composed and synchronised around a person's life. Specialisation can improve each component while creating a separate problem of alignment. Nominal integration is insufficient. The required capabilities have to be brought together as the situation develops.

The pairings in Table 1 are a starting hypothesis, not an algorithm. They make mismatch discussable without pretending that demand can always be classified cleanly in advance.

Table 1. A default match between demand and response

Demand	Default form	What would count as mismatch?
Predictable	Reliable transaction or specified provision	Relationship-building, delay or discretion that adds no value; or a transaction so rigid that it creates failure demand.
Stable purpose, high variation	Bounded judgement	Forcing variation into one script; or treating every case as wholly unique.
Specialist	Expert composition around the situation	Referral between specialisms without anyone able to compose them; or over-coordination where one specialist response would do.
Open 'help me'	Open response able to revise the task	Premature classification; or leaving one worker to carry uncertainty that the wider system has not authorised or resourced.

Standardisation is valuable within its range. It reduces effort, error and delay. Ashby's law is a reminder that a response needs enough variety for the demand it faces (Ashby, 1956). Street-level discretion also persists even when organisations try to remove it; the issue is whether it is acknowledged, supported and made answerable (Lipsky, 1980). Sometimes the mismatch is not too little variety inside a settled task. The task or boundary is wrong.

'Failure demand' makes one part of this relationship visible: demand caused by failing to do something, or to do it right, for the citizen (Seddon, 2003, 2008). Access rules, capacity decisions and management practice can create further demand and displace consequences across a system (Walley et al., 2019). Counting it matters only when what is learned can change the design that produced it.

Form of response and scope of holding

The ladder becomes more exact when its landmarks are plotted against two distinct questions. The form-of-response axis asks how far the citizen's situation may reshape the response and, at the open end, the institution's account of the task. It runs from a fixed frame through bounded judgement and agency-building to expert composition and task-revising response. Across these reciprocal forms there is a cumulative capability relation: a service able to hold open demand should also be able to make a simple transaction simple. The reverse does not follow. A scripted service cannot become open merely by telling employees to be relational.

Figure 1. Form of response and scope of holding

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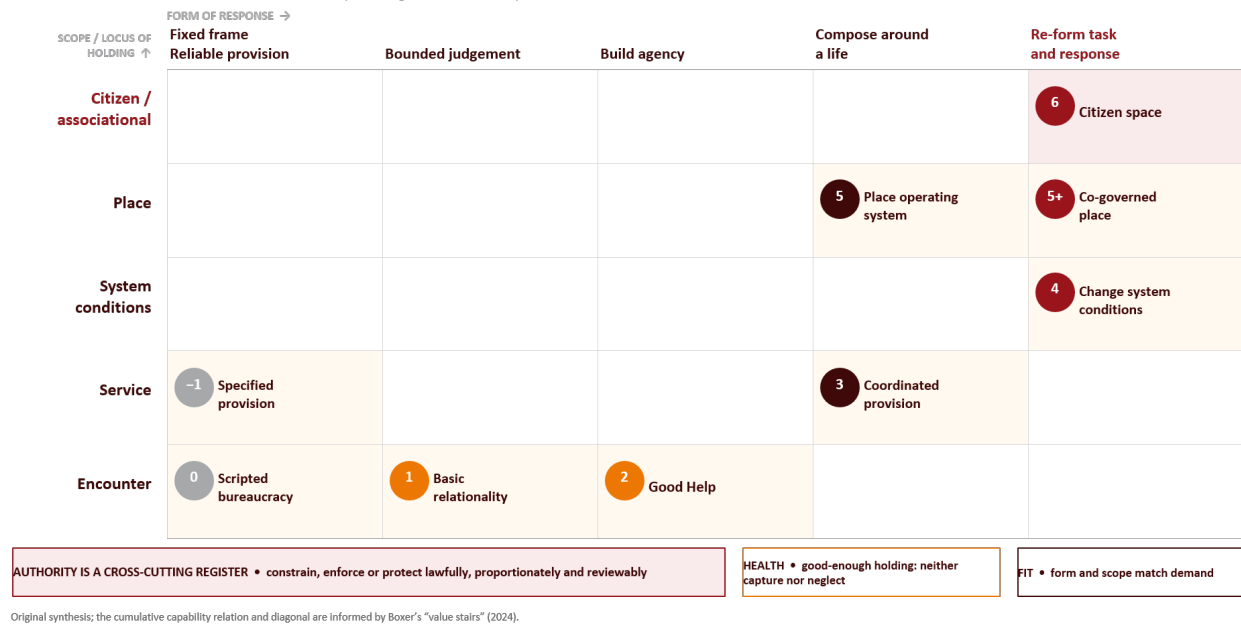


Figure 1. The ladder's landmarks plotted against form of response and scope of holding. Authority remains a cross-cutting register; health and fit are separate judgements.

The scope axis asks where sense-making, capability, uncertainty, resources and risk are held: in an encounter, a service, the conditions around several services, a place, or citizen association. It has no intrinsic 'better'. The right locus is the smallest scope able to understand the situation, authorise action, mobilise capability, carry uncertainty and share risk. A transaction may sit properly at the encounter. Repeated failures may require changes to organisational or system conditions. Some conflicts and costs require place, regional or national authority.

The two axes are distinct, but they couple at the open end. A worker can listen openly in one encounter. They cannot sustainably carry unclassifiable demand, contested risk and cross-boundary resource alone. As the response becomes more open, a wider system must provide information, permission, capability, supervision and risk-sharing. This is why relational practice can look excellent at the boundary while remaining structurally impossible to sustain.

Place and citizen space should also remain distinct. Place is a territorial scope for governance and action. Citizen space is a source and mode of collective action in which people act as family members, neighbours, residents and democratic participants rather than as service users assembled by institutions (McKnight, 1995; Russell, 2020). A place partnership can be wide in scope and closed to what citizens' lives are showing it. Citizen action can be small in geography and highly generative. Co-governance connects the two by giving citizens real decision rights while public institutions continue to hold rights, redistribution and statutory duties.

Authority is a cross-cutting register, not a third developmental axis. Public services sometimes have to enforce law, protect others, collect tax or intervene under serious risk. Its healthy form is explicit, lawful, proportionate, reviewable and constrained by rights. Its pathology is concealed or excessive coercion presented as help.

Position, health and fit

The fuller diagnostic requires three judgements. Position asks what form is being used and where the work is held. Health asks whether the arrangement is enacted well. Fit asks whether the form and scope suit the demand and context of use. A clean transaction can be healthy and badly fitted to open demand. A place partnership can sit at a wide scope while remaining supply-led. Citizen action can be exclusionary or badly governed.

Health has a common practical test: does the arrangement hold well enough? Too much holding becomes pre-emptive. Institutional order fills the person's space, choice is crowded out, or coordination becomes surveillance. Too little becomes neglect. The citizen, family or worker is left to carry missing orchestration, risk and work.

'Holding' is not another word for hierarchy. In Winnicott's account, holding protects continuity against disruption that cannot yet be borne through establishing a good-enough frame for what needs dealing with; Bion's related idea of containment concerns turning unprocessed experience into something that can be thought about (Winnicott, 1960; Bion, 1962). Public services need good-enough holding that is not just protection against

intolerable disruption, within which context can then be added shared sense-making within a good-enough frame. These can be provided vertically through leadership responsive to what is having to be dealt at the organization's edges, horizontally through peer consultation and group supervision, and collectively through review of live situations. The therapeutic-community tradition distributed this work through peer relations rather than locating it only in a superior (Main, 1946; Rapoport, 1960).

Good-enough holding means enough support and public authority to prevent abandonment, with enough restraint to leave room for the person's agency and for challenge to the institution's frame. More openness is not automatically more humane. Relational processes can be intrusive, arbitrary or exhausting. Nor does citizen control abolish public obligation.

The strategy ceiling and the four rails

Visible relational behaviour depends on less visible conditions. The point where learning from the work ceases to be able to alter those conditions can be called a strategy ceiling. Below it, staff may improvise intelligently. Above it sit rules, budgets, measures, contracts, professional accountabilities and political choices that the encounter cannot change by itself. A relational model is sustainable only when evidence can cross that ceiling and receive an answer. The sponsoring system is the set of leaders, professions, regulators, contracts, finance arrangements and political commitments able to hold that ceiling in place or revise it. Sustainable learning needs a route from evidence to that authority (Boxer and Taylor, 2026a).

Table 2 sets out four organisational rails. They are not departments or a checklist of enabling factors. They are continuing relations between the boundary and the wider system. Each has to carry authority, information, resource or learning in both directions.

Table 2. Four organisational rails behind the encounter

Rail	What it must carry	Characteristic failure when it is missing
Authority and supervision	Decision rights near demand; access to wider capability; vertical and lateral escalation; reflective supervision; shared risk.	'Empowerment' without resources; gatekeeping, unsafe discretion or heroics.
Information and measurement	Citizen purpose, history, repeated effort and cross-boundary effects; visible assumptions; measures for resolution, equity and learning.	Outputs improve while unresolved demand moves; institutional categories harden into data and code.
Funding and risk	Flexible resource; value across budgets and time; transition risk; visibility of the joining work carried by households, workers and communities.	One budget blocks worthwhile work; cost and risk are displaced elsewhere.
Governance and learning	A route for evidence to revise rules, measures, resource, task and boundary; vertical and horizontal accountability; an answer from the sponsoring system.	Learning stops at the strategy ceiling; the relational model remains a protected exception.

Authority, supervision and double delegation

The first question is what the person nearest the demand can actually decide and commit. Authority without capability is reckless; capability without authority is theatre. Permission to 'do whatever it takes' without money, information, specialist support or shared risk relocates the system's failure into the worker's job.

When a situation exceeds one person's span of complexity, the response has to widen. Sometimes that means escalation through a formal hierarchy. Sometimes it means lateral mobilisation: peer consultation, specialist advice, a multidisciplinary group, pooled resource or collective review. The design question is what wider capability and authority can be brought to the situation without losing its context. Supervision should support judgement and learning, not merely police conformance.

This is the practical content of double delegation. First, authority and capability are delegated towards the edge. Second, authority is delegated to people at the edge to frame the situation appropriately, within the terms of which they can be held horizontally accountable for effects through the life of the situation, including how they framed what to do (Boxer and Eigen, 2005; Boxer and Veryard, 2006). Vertical accountability for law, mandate and resource remains. It is joined by answerability for consequences across the situation.

Vibert (2014) distinguishes authority grounded in politics and administration, law, market and contract, and custom or social ties. Open relational work changes the mix and increases the importance of associational ties. It does not abolish law, rights or public mandate.

Information, measurement and digital architecture

Measures and information determine what the institution can see. Administrative data are traces of earlier transductions, not neutral copies of lives. Vertical aggregation can count contacts, episodes and outputs. Horizontal alignment is needed to reconstruct purpose, relationships, repeated effort and effects through time.

Targets for speed, closure or channel shift can move unresolved demand elsewhere while success is reported. Relational work needs evidence about resolution, repeat demand, stability, citizen effort, equity, learning and short- and long-term effects. This does not require one totalising record. It requires the ability to connect relevant information around a situation and make the assumptions behind that connection visible.

Digital platforms and AI can make good transactions easier, align timelines, identify patterns and locate capabilities that would otherwise remain fragmented. They can also harden earlier categories into code, infer from records produced by a failing design, and move judgement into opaque exception processes. AI can support dynamic composition. It cannot guarantee the situated interpretation on which an open response depends (Birhane, 2021; Boxer and Veryard, 2026).

Funding, risk and indirect value

Value crosses organisational boundaries and time. The work of making fragmented provision usable does not disappear when the system fails to do it. Citizens, carers, voluntary organisations and frontline staff carry it as alignment and cohesion costs. Boxer (2012) describes the value created by reducing that hidden burden as 'indirect value'.

Prevention or flexible support may cost one budget and benefit another years later. An investment may be worthwhile because it buys capability to learn and adapt, not because one budget can promise a cashable saving in advance. A full account asks who pays, who benefits, who carries transition risk and which costs have merely moved to another service, year or household.

This changes the financial question. The unit of value cannot always be the service transaction or the investing organisation. Place-based and cross-service work needs some means of sharing resource and risk across the scope at which effects arise, without pretending that every social benefit can be converted into a certain future saving.

Governance and consequential learning

Open demand can challenge what the organisation thinks it is for. Learning that revises the frame is a different act from improving performance inside settled rules. A viable-system account makes the distinction clear: the part of governance concerned with identity and policy must be able to revisit them, not only defend them (Beer, 1979; Espejo and Reyes, 2011).

Stronger vertical governance alone cannot do this. Vertical accountability for mandate and resources has to be joined by horizontal transparency and accountability for outcomes in context of use. Governance must be able to learn from the edges, revise the frame and authorise new combinations of capability while retaining lawful public responsibility.

This is also where institutional defence concentrates. Unclassifiable demand exposes limits of expertise, authority and identity. More script, assurance and aggregation can make that uncertainty disappear from view. Social-defence research helps explain why retreat into the existing frame is organisational as well as personal (Menzies Lyth, 1960). The companion paper on the evacuation of the public realm develops this mechanism in more depth (Boxer and Taylor, 2026b). Here the design consequence is enough: unless governance can carry uncertainty and authorise revision, relational teams remain protected exceptions and the prior design returns when pressure rises or sponsorship ends.

Using the diagnostic

Apply the model to real demand, not organisational aspiration. Start with recent contacts in citizens' own words. Follow where each demand went, who did the joining work, what happened through time and what became of the learning. Then ask six questions:

1. What kind of demand is this: predictable, high-variation, specialist or open 'help me'? What form would normally fit it?
2. What form is actually used, and at what scope are sense-making, capability, uncertainty, resources and risk held?
3. Is the arrangement healthy? Where does holding become capture or surveillance; where does its absence become neglect or abandonment?
4. What can the person nearest the demand decide? When the situation exceeds their span, can capability widen vertically or laterally without losing context?
5. Can evidence revise measures, resources, rules, task, purpose and boundary, or only improve a fixed response? Where is the strategy ceiling?
6. Who carries the work, cost and risk: citizen, family, worker, one provider, the place or the wider state? What part do citizens have in deciding what changes?

The output is not a score or an instruction to move everything upwards. It is a design specification for a deliberate mix. A payment may need a clean transaction. A stable but varied request may need bounded judgement. Interacting needs may require expert composition around a life. Repeated failure may require changes to system conditions. Some conflicts and costs can only be held at place, regional or national scale. Citizen-led activity may ask institutions for dependable provision rather than participation.

The organisational aim is requisite agility: standardise reusable capabilities and make them reliable, rather than standardising every situation. Specialist skills, legal frameworks, payments, data services and other capabilities can be common. Their composition around a particular purpose must remain variable (Anderson and Boxer, 2008; Boxer and Taylor, 2026a).

The approach is a practitioner proposition, not a validated instrument. Research should test whether users can distinguish form, scope, authority, health and fit; how mismatch affects cost, equity, citizen effort, staff experience and trust; and which forms of supervision and governance allow organisations to carry open demand without capture or neglect. Evaluation should also ask whose knowledge counts, who gains voice and who carries work. More open arrangements do not automatically create fairness.

Conclusion

The ladder identifies degrees of relationality. This companion diagnostic asks whether the public system can carry the degree it claims to be using.

A more open encounter needs more than discretion. It needs a scope of holding able to mobilise capability, share risk and preserve context. It needs authority and supervision, information and measures that retain the demand signal, funding able to recognise indirect value, and governance through which learning can revise the frame. Without those rails, relational work survives as heroism, abandonment or a temporary exception.

The design discipline is to use the smallest scope able to hold the situation, hold enough to prevent abandonment without crowding out agency, and choose the simplest response that genuinely fits the demand. The harder test is whether what is learned at the boundary can change the conditions behind it.

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