



Leading Change in the Public Sector

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The public sector is decidedly varied in character, governance, and size. Its boundaries have changed in recent years and will indubitably change again as a progressively stronger consumer culture, rising living standards, and a more diverse society lead to greater expectations of responsiveness, reliability, and accessibility. While the pressure to collaborate across different organizations remains unchanged, pressure to adapt and innovate has never been higher for the public sector. The political context, budget apportionment and allocation, lack of market competition, and the ethos of public service clearly distinguish the public sector from all others. Not surprisingly, leaders need more than ever to reaffirm workplace commitment to the creation of public value.

Value Creation: The term *value creation* typically refers to processes that produce benefit for your customers and for your organization. They are the processes most important to “running your business”—those that involve the majority of your employees and that generate your products, services, and positive business results for your stakeholders

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What is value? And what does ‘value-added’ mean? In the private sector, value is largely associated with the benefit received from a product or service in exchange for its cost. ‘Value-added’ typically describes a specific step or activity that contributes something a customer cares about. Not surprisingly, the public sector tends to define ‘value’ or ‘value-added’ in business terms as a product or service whose benefits outweigh their costs to the customer. The difference rests in how we measure public ‘costs.’ Not everyone, after all, derives the same

pleasures from products and services paid for with tax dollars; indeed, some products and/or services are highly valued by some while others harshly criticize the same products/services. Mark Moore, a professor at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, and author of *Creating Public Value* (Harvard University Press, 1995), contends public value is created in two different ways, directed at two different audiences:

1. Public value is created when governmental agencies use the money and authority given to them to produce things that benefit individuals ... as they perceive it.
2. Public value is created when government agencies meet the expectations of citizens and elected officials, that these agencies be accountable for the way they operate; that is, that they be efficient, fair, open, and accountable.

Clearly, this two-part definition not only separates the two types of audiences that judge public agencies (e.g., FEMA), but it also acknowledges **'value' is defined by those observing/benefiting from the agency, not by the agency itself.** Moreover, this way of looking at value creation makes it very clear the public sector has two overriding tasks: 1) deliver things individuals want, the way they want them, and 2) operate in a way that meets public expectations and supports public values.

Understandably, the creation of value is not solely a leader's responsibility within the public sector; it is incumbent upon all public servants, working together, to do so. Teamwork is essential, a necessary component of the value stream. An organization's people, after all, define its culture, drive its performance, and embody its knowledge base; thus, they are the keys to a successful transformation. In addition, they are more inclined to support change they help create while, on the other hand, resisting mandated change.

The team notwithstanding, effective change management clearly begins at the top. Elements particularly important in implementing and sustaining change initiatives that genuinely take root and eventually resolve the problems they are intended to fix, according to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), are

- a demonstrated leadership commitment and accountability for change;
- the integration of management improvement initiatives into programmatic decision making;
- thoughtful and rigorous planning to guide decisions;
- employee involvement to elicit ideas and build commitment and accountability;
- organizational alignment to streamline operations and clarify accountability; and
- strong and continuing congressional involvement.

Perhaps the single most important element of successful change management initiatives, reports the GAO, is the demonstrated commitment through the personal involvement of top leaders in developing and directing reform efforts. The responsibility for improving long-standing management weaknesses is not something to "staff out." "Today in government," suggests Robert Behn, professor at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, "'performance management' is all the rage. Yet if you read or listen carefully, you will observe that, too often, what is meant by performance 'management' is little more than performance 'measurement.'" "To improve the performance of public agencies, measurement can certainly help," Behn continues, "but performance will never go up unless the agency's executives exercise real, motivational leadership."

Leadership. People look for vision, integrity, and judgment in their leaders; those charged with the responsibility to lead change must be busy communicating, engaging employees with the vision, and creating an enabling

culture because they recognize too many overlapping reform initiatives often blur an otherwise compelling leadership vision. Change of the sort we are discussing is not easy; it challenges and impacts organizations from both inside and outside of the organization:

- Internal—structured shifts or programs that are an ongoing phenomenon within an organization. These changes may be undertaken to avoid deterioration of current performance or to improve future performance of a process or system. In this sense they are controlled and managed from within the organization in an orderly, planned, and systematic way.
- External—environmental changes that come from outside the organization, where the organization exercises little or no control over them. In business, this could mean shifting economic tides, new competitors, or radical technology developments. In government, it can mean changes in the world situation, the administration, legislation, budgetary issues, or management reform.

Leading change in the public sector is not a tidy thing to do. In addition to top leadership involvement, it requires clear lines of accountability if there is to be any hope of overcoming an agency's natural resistance to change, marshalling the resources needed to improve management, and building/maintaining the organization-wide commitment to new ways of doing business. For example, agencies need to be less hierarchical, less stove-piped, and less inwardly focused. They must work better with nongovernmental organizations and industry to achieve results, and realize a better balance between customer and employee results. Public agencies also need a corps of individuals who, while operating within the framework of the rule of law, are able to apply visionary leadership skills in tackling extraordinarily difficult challenges.

The GAO reports many of the major challenges confronting federal agencies — among them, globalization, state and public administration reform, the growing quest for popular participation, widening income disparities,

religious conflict, ethnic diversity, and the rapid pace of technological change — represent long-standing, difficult, and complex problems not easily or quickly resolved. In fact, implementing and sustaining major change initiatives often requires a cultural transformation. Not surprisingly, public agencies are driven to transform their cultures to become more results-oriented, customer-focused, performance-based, and collaborative in nature.

Embracing change. Most assuredly, the last eight years or so are proving to be a period of profound transition for the public sector. We can see major transformation efforts underway across the federal government in agencies as diverse as the Department of Defense, United States Postal Service, Internal Revenue Service, Centers for Disease Control, and GAO. Of course, agencies cannot expect everyone to be excited about change. Agencies that have struggled with various initiatives in the past, for example, may face considerable pushback from people, internally and externally, who are resistant to new approaches. Getting people to see beyond the well-known territory of status quo and, perhaps, a few of their own fears — real or perceived — is an uneasy, daunting challenge of piercing relevance.

For the public agency that embraces change, this is a very exciting time full of great opportunity. We are reminded of change's persistent march in Abraham Lincoln's concluding remarks in his *1862 Annual Message to Congress*:

The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise—with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew.

During times of major change, **it is easy to lose sight of the important while attending to the urgent**, especially as public agencies contend with the pressures of transforming themselves from process-oriented institutions to results-oriented organizations.

A major crisis confronting today's public sector is limited resources, too few to possibly satisfy all legitimate needs. Dollars — even taxpayers' dollars — do not grow on trees. Consequently, public agencies, though urged to take great care in deciding how best to use limited resources at their disposal, often fail. It's an old problem. And satisfying it the old-fashioned way is not working. A better approach is needed.

New approaches to old problems are nothing new. Neither the problem nor the solution should distract us. What matters is the persistent charge, the willingness to leave the comforts of status quo behind, to forge ahead in search of new discoveries that lay the groundwork for a better tomorrow, and to finish the work. To quote from President G.W. Bush's Management Agenda,

Government likes to begin things — to declare grand new programs and causes. But **good beginnings are not the measure of success**. What matters in the end is completion. Performance. Results. Not just making promises, but making good on promises. In my Administration, that will be the standard from the farthest regional office of government to the highest office in the land.

The author and social philosopher Eric Hoffer (1902-1983) wrote, "In times of change learners inherit the Earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists." What an elegant way to tell us people who embrace change will continue to move forward while those who don't will get left behind.

It is creativity that draws color from the grays; it also draws sharp, often uncomfortable, contrasts from the ‘old way of doing business.’ Public agencies are increasingly found wanting as they struggle to avoid suffocation in the smog of “that’s the way we’ve always done it.” National attention on agencies such as FEMA and TSA has served to clear the air and, with the proper attention, can breathe new life into those organizations. With this new life comes the ability to see more clearly, to bring into focus those things that matter most, especially to the people they serve.

That’s not to say a clearer focus will make the journey easy or, for that matter, certain. Indeed, many entities of the federal government are in the throes of a major paradigm shift, an evolving system of assumptions, concepts, values, and practices that constitutes a new way of viewing reality ... and the benefactors, America’s communities, are sure to notice. On a cautionary note, the chief characteristic of a paradigm is that it has its own set of rules and illuminates its own set of facts. In this way it becomes self-validating and, therefore, resistant to change. Kuhn noted as long as a paradigm explains most observed tendencies and solves the problems most people want solved, it remains dominant. But as new phenomena begin to contradict it, the paradigm succumbs to increasing doubt. As these anomalies multiply, it is thrown into crisis.

When a new paradigm is articulated — (e.g., Einstein’s theory of quantum mechanics) — a broad paradigmatic shift occurs. Change of the magnitude public agencies are experiencing will be, at times, difficult and unpleasant for some. Without due diligence, obstacles are certain to impede progress. Many agencies

are partnering to explore and evaluate any number of end-state conditions necessary to achieve success across their efforts.

Of course, end states do not represent the end at all; they are merely the beginning — they signal a new temperament, a realization that something better lies just over the next hill. And they will not be achieved overnight. Achieving end-state conditions often will take some time as obstacles are eliminated and opportunities for change become clearer. Typical obstacles may include:

- Insufficient staffing to properly oversee the program(s).
- An urgent need for additional partners and/or stakeholder buy-in; likely not enough realized capacity within the current government/contractor mix to accomplish the work at hand.
- Internal guidance lacks clarity; a plan for effective collaboration with affected parties, supporting organizations, and stakeholders (e.g., citizens, community officials, small business owners and entrepreneurs, lenders, local project sponsors, and others) is needed.
- Unstable program vision; a clear unified definition of end-state conditions that align agency oversight expectations, national metrics, stakeholder support, and local input is needed.
- Unclear message; urgent or compelling? Half-hearted acceptance among users and stakeholders.
- Untimely funds distributions.
- Ineffective policies/processes create less than desirable effect on “production” (e.g., excessive quantity of contract actions is unnecessary, slows down overall process, and complicates the journey).
- Weak, inconsistent guidance; conflicting or changing guidance from agency ‘leadership’ creates confusion and inconsistencies with implementation, and results in additional costs.
- Daunting review process(es).
- Inadequate — and erroneous — nationally available datasets.
- Ineffective use of performance-based measures, metrics, and techniques.
- Underutilized partnerships.
- Waning community outreach.
- Neglect of cultural issues.
- Inadequate familiarization, training, and guidance.
- Cost overruns and scope changes consume new program funding.

Bend in the road. It should come as little or no surprise the road to success is seldom straight and narrow; it is more often winding with ups and

downs, speed bumps, and potholes, dotted with an occasional guardrail (e.g., policy, regulation, standard, etc.) fashioned to keep us in our lane. Quoting from William Duggan's *Strategic Intuition*,

Kuhn's notion of a bend in the road is a striking contrast to the common idea of a breakthrough as a leap in progress, where there's a break in the road and you leap over the gap. Through bends rather than breaks in the road, Kuhn keeps our feet very much on the ground. The common idea of how a leap in progress happens is a leap of imagination. Kuhn gives us an alternative to imagination that we can apply to realms of achievement other than science. He shows us in detail how the bend in the road happens: a selective combination of elements from the past makes something new. The elements themselves are not new. ... [Kuhn] calls each bend in the road a 'paradigm shift.' ... In business we call it a business model.

What leaders, particularly in the public sector, must learn from Kuhn's radical discovery is ground-breaking: each bend in the road represents a new opportunity precisely because **achievement precedes theory**, not the other way around.

In words attributed to Alan Cohen, "It takes a lot of courage to release the familiar and seemingly secure, to embrace the new. But there is no real security in what is no longer meaningful. There is more security in the adventurous and exciting, for in movement there is life, and in change there is power." 'Power' notwithstanding, changing ineffective policies, measures, or behavior patterns can be daunting. Not only are they typically far more damaging to the *system* but, to make matters worse, they are far more difficult to identify and eliminate. Why? In scientific terms, policy constraints are neither testable nor falsifiable; they are not measurable system attributes. Said differently, it is not possible to measure a policy; it is only possible to measure the effect a policy has on a

system, subsystem, or individual resource capacity. To overcome the debilitating effects of bad policy, agencies must take three important steps:

1. Empower people to rapidly identify core erroneous policies without fear of retribution;
2. Encourage construction of new policies that will not bring with them new devastating problems; and,
3. Enable construction of a feasible implementation plan that would not be hampered by resistance to change.

Understanding Public Sector Culture. An organization's culture defines which issues are seen as problems, which problems become most important, and how the organization responds to the important problems. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is a good example. After September 11, FEMA's Office of National Preparedness was charged with training "first responders" across the country in dealing with terrorist events. In March 2003, FEMA joined 22 other federal agencies, programs, and offices in becoming the Department of Homeland Security. The enormous complications of merging 22 different federal agencies, including FEMA, into DHS have understandably preoccupied top leaders. They have devoted an inordinate amount of energy simply synchronizing a plethora of operations residing in a number of disparate agencies. This focus on terrorism effectively transformed FEMA's culture and reduced its capacity to deal with natural disasters; moreover, according to the March 2006 *Statement for the Record to the United States Senate*, it created an inward-looking culture with an extremely narrow tunnel vision, devoted to controlling activities dealing with homeland security.

An organization with such a rigid hierarchy, coupled with a fixed pattern of response, will inevitably be overwhelmed by events that do not match its

structure. Events that clearly illuminated the disparities — and difficulties — associated with a less than optimal mission alignment within FEMA and across the DHS would soon take center stage across the nation.

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina, perhaps the costliest and certainly one of the deadliest hurricanes in the history of the United States, made second and third landfalls as a Category 3 storm on the morning of August 29 in southeast Louisiana and at the Louisiana/Mississippi state line, respectively. Storm surges caused severe, catastrophic damage along the Gulf coast. Major cities, including Mobile, Alabama, Waveland and Biloxi/Gulfport in Mississippi, and New Orleans and other towns in Louisiana were devastated. Levees separating several New Orleans' canals from Lake Pontchartrain were breached by the surge. Ultimately, 80% of the city and many areas of neighboring parishes were flooded for weeks.

Criticism of the federal, state and local governments' reaction to the storm was widespread and resulted in an investigation by the United States Congress and the resignation of the FEMA director. At the core of FEMA's struggle to deal with Katrina was the change in culture that preceded the storm: a focus on terrorism, to the exclusion of other hazards, and an emphasis on response, to the exclusion of remediation and other strategies of reducing risks in advance of events. Eric Holdeman, then Director of the King County, Washington, Office of Emergency Management, published an editorial in the *Washington Post* in the days immediately after Katrina struck the Gulf Coast:

To be sure, America may well be hit by another major terrorist attack, and we must be prepared for such an event. But I can guarantee you that hurricanes like the one that ripped into Louisiana and Mississippi yesterday, along with tornadoes,

earthquakes, volcanoes, tsunamis, floods, windstorms, mudslides, power outages, fires and perhaps a pandemic flu will have to be dealt with on a weekly and daily basis throughout this country. They are coming for sure, sooner or later, even as we are, to an unconscionable degree, weakening our ability to respond to them.

On the heels of the Katrina tragedy came a heightened awareness and renewed focus on FEMA's natural disaster response mission — a mission that demands a flexible, outward-facing culture devoted to building partnerships with the vast range of organizations — public, private, and nonprofit; federal, state, and local — whose operations, put together, define how well the nation's response works.

What became abundantly clear is a nation's collective response is not limited solely to civil servants. When we're speaking of change and the people who help effect it within the federal sector, we must not forget the team often is comprised of many players — postal workers, military personnel, contractors, and grantees, including state and local government officials working on federal mandates, not to mention tens of thousands of community volunteers. In 2005, roughly 14.6 million people, working directly or indirectly for the federal government, comprised this team. The contractor-to-civil servant ration, as a point of reference, was estimated at about five-and-a-half to one. Counted among those contractors is a not-so-small contingent of consultants.

Any more, consultants are just as much a part of the team as civil servants. On average, half of all public sector reform initiatives use one or more consultants. The consultant was either a facilitator or advisor to the change process for three-quarters of those efforts, and in most cases the consultant was a change management expert, with some consultants bringing both technical and change management experience to the team. Though not often clearly

articulated, most teams — even those with unique needs — expect their consultants generally to contribute in three areas:

- Project and process experience;
- Help with communications; and
- Meeting facilitation.

What else do consultants need to bring to the table if they are to be accepted as viable members of the team? In simple terms, they need relevant experience, adequate breadth, a successful track record, a willingness to transfer knowledge, training and facilitation skills, and integrity. Armed with these ‘credentials,’ consultants can — and often — help shape the public sector culture and positively mold its future. By working with others toward change, it is the extended team that creates desired results — the inclusive, cohesive, productive organization reaching new levels of excellence in performance and significance.

Cultural transformation. In short, we are discussing the collective participation in cultural transformation — the evolution (sometimes revolution!) that underpins innovation. Peter Drucker speaks of innovation as "change that creates a new dimension of performance." Catch that? **It is the performance that changes the culture** — not the reverse. In the end, it is a good thing that culture is not easily changed. A culture defines the heart of the organization, and a change of heart is not to be taken lightly. Changing the culture of an organization requires the organization itself to transform — its purpose, its focus on customers, and results. Frances Hesselbein, editor-in-chief of *Leader to Leader*, chairman of the Drucker Foundation, and former chief executive of Girl Scouts of the USA, tells us the “Culture does not change because we desire to

change it. Culture changes when the organization is transformed; the culture reflects the realities of people working together every day.”

This transmogrification becomes evident with the evolution of strategic linkages fashioned between central, overarching applications such as governance, communications, risk management, and performance monitoring. In *Managing In a Time of Great Change*, Drucker nudges us closer to the crux of the matter: "For the organization to perform to a high standard, its members must believe that what it is doing is, in the last analysis, the one contribution to community and society on which all others depend."

Successful change efforts start with a vision of radically improved performance and the relentless organization-wide pursuit of that vision. This is where Kuhn’s paradigm shift (Duggan’s bend in the road) comes into play. It is such an introspective and inclusive process by which an organization formulates its values and revisits its mission that allows organizations to serve their customers and communities, to be viable and relevant in an uncertain future.

Public agencies are key players for integrating “theory” into business practice. Being responsive to communities while offering transparency, clarity, and value are sure to pay huge dividends. A good example is an agency’s fiduciary responsibility to its citizenry. Being good stewards of the funds entrusted to the agency requires foresight, intuition, and teamwork. Taking advantage of business trends can be helpful at times. For years, policy makers have urged the use of private-sector ‘best practices’ to improve government functions at all levels. Integrating best business practices directly within agencies can go a long way in meeting America’s communities’ needs and priorities.

Conclusion. The capacity to change and to serve is the essence of a great and vibrant culture. Change management is seldom easy, even with well-intentioned help. To begin, an organization must first begin the slow and tedious process of chipping away at the hardened status quo before new tools or practices can be introduced. A sense of urgency must prevail and it can succeed only if a new vision and strategy are effectively communicated ... early and often ... by senior leadership. Then the changes must be firmly grounded in the organizational culture if they should have the remotest possibility for success.

Indeed, **the central task of leadership is to create an organizational culture that supports the mission.** Empowerment, orchestrating short-term wins, and consolidating gains to produce even more wins will help anchor new approaches in the culture. An engaged and effective leadership team is the key if public agencies are to create a nimble, effective, robust, results-driven strategy that promotes change. Strong leadership must be based on a networked rather than a hierarchical approach to governance. It requires a sound strategy.

In recent years, the GAO has made a number of recommendations for improving federal performance; the recommendations are especially relevant to agency business processes and business management teams. A summary list follows:

- Clear goals and performance measures should drive daily operations. A central principle of performance-based management is a clear understanding of what is to be accomplished and how progress will be gauged. This means recognizing the importance of using results-oriented goals and quantifiable measures to address program performance.
- Building the organization's human capital is key to achieving results. Agency success is possible only with the right employees who have the

- right training, tools, structures, incentives, and accountability to work effectively.
- Programs and processes must be linked to results and customer satisfaction. This means that successful organizations will need to have a clear understanding of their mission and be able to articulate how day-to-day operations contribute to mission-related results. Results-oriented performance should also draw upon best business practices, such as outsourcing and shared-services concepts. A common goal in the agency should be to not only produce financial statements that withstand the test of an audit, but to also routinely generate useful, reliable, and timely financial information for day-to-day operations.
 - Decisions should be based on sound data. Decision-making processes must be based on sound, reliable, and timely data. Collecting this data requires integrated systems that help to clarify the true cost of operations.
 - Integrated business process reform strategy. Business management processes must not be addressed in isolation or in a piecemeal fashion. Reengineering should be viewed more holistically, as it connects to other management problems. It must be addressed in an integrated, enterprise-wide approach.
 - Active leadership. Strong, sustained leadership is essential to changing deeply rooted corporate cultures and successfully implementing reforms.
 - Clear lines of responsibility and accountability. Successful implementation is dependent upon clear lines of decision-making authority and resource control.
 - Incentives and consequences. Incentives should be offered that motivate decision-makers to initiate and implement efforts that are consistent with better program outcomes. An emphasis at the Congressional level on results-oriented management can also have an impact on resource allocation decisions.
 - Enterprise architecture. An enterprise-wide management architecture is essential to effectively manage large, complex system modernization efforts presently underway. The Clinger-Cohen Act requires agencies to develop and maintain an integrated, system architecture.
 - Monitoring and oversight. The periodic reporting of status information to OMB, Congress, and the audit community is essential to ensuring effective change management and implementation of business process reforms.

So, what does all of this mean?

A change initiative is any action to alter the status quo. By extension, change management is the proactive molding of an organization's culture, as needed, to successfully implement a change initiative. A number of critical, interdependent components comprise the change agenda. **Leadership**, chief

among them, must set a clear direction as an essential driver for a successful change. Indeed, one of the most significant factors that impede success in organizations is lack of leadership. Cultural resistance to change and parochialism can play a critical role in hindering reform efforts as well. Many current operating practices within the public sector have a long, entrenched bureaucratic history, and have developed piecemeal over time in order to accommodate the needs of different organizations. The more deeply rooted these systems and attitudes, the more difficult comprehensive change. Such change is unlikely to be immediate; therefore, strong leadership is necessary to sustain long-term commitment to performance-based management and other reforms.

Effective **Communications**, therefore, must be planned, targeted, and doggedly carried out in sync with the **Values** that under gird the organizational structure. The **Organizational Structure** following a change must be compatible with and supportive of the changes and systems that result from the initiative. Incentives for change must be evident, and the way ahead must be clearly articulated.

The degree to which leaders are able to manage change, develop consensus, and sustain commitment will determine the success (or failure) of any initiative or reform effort.

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