

School of Public Policy & Governance

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Bending rules, making connections and having fun: Potential elements for a strategy to advance public service innovation

Presentation to a Symposium on
Innovation, Risk and Control at the University Seminar
Canada School of Public Service
Ottawa, May 8, 2008

Ian D. Clark, Professor of Public Policy
School of Public Policy and Governance
University of Toronto

Introduction

Allan Tupper has asked me to suggest three research priorities that could help with the question of how to encourage more innovation in the public service of Canada.

Here are my three proposed topics: bending rules, making connections and having fun.

Before anyone calls for my photograph to be removed from the anteroom outside the Treasury Board Secretary's office, let me provide the long titles of my proposed research subjects.

1. How to identify the most thought-inhibiting and administratively costly rules and replace them with more innovation-friendly accountability mechanisms.
2. How to make better use of information technology to connect with outside experts and share knowledge with minimal increase in leaks and embarrassment.
3. How to engage human emotions to enhance organizational performance with minimal sacrifice of fairness and inclusivity.

These three proposals reflect my experience with the 2006 Blue Ribbon Panel on Grants and Contributions and our hopes for the Public Policy and Governance Portal. The first addresses the "web of rules" and the second builds on "Web 2.0." The third is the leadership challenge of creating the passion and buzz associated with innovative teams.

Context

Before elaborating on these three proposals, let me make two points of context.

First, innovation needs a purpose. I suspect that if Canadians were asked today what they would like to see more of in their government they would not say, "please be more innovative." They would likely say: please deliver your projects on time and on budget; please reduce your administrative costs through operating efficiencies; and please communicate with us in an open and honest manner. I would therefore recommend that the public service innovation strategy focus on implementation and efficiency – on getting more bang for the buck.

Secondly, if one views the innovation challenge as one of making changes to improve organizational effectiveness and efficiency, then one should remember the admonition Paul Thomas made in 1996¹:

“there is no one best way to approach the management of change, particularly in the public sector, which remains diverse and distinctive in the challenges it involves.”

Thomas reproduced his “baker’s dozen of hints for would-be change masters” in a presentation earlier this year to the Institute of Public Administration of Australia in Sydney², and the 13 points should be incorporated into any strategy to advance public service innovation.

Bending rules

My first proposed area of research is on rule bending.

The Clerk of the Privy Council said in his 2008 Report on the Public Service³:

“*We need a better balance between risk taking and accountability.* This requires reducing the current web of rules that saps initiative and stifles innovation. Effective organizations have robust and effective risk management systems. This means creating an environment that encourages the reasonable use of discretion by managers and employees within a framework of risk management and accountability for the results.”

But where should one start? My research suggestion is to help prioritize the processes to be changed. The web of rules has become so dense that no results-oriented public servant can actually be following all the administrative regulations and processes. I suspect that every single public servant who is trying in 2008 to provide reasonable public value for his or her salary regularly takes actions that could be interpreted as bending the current rules.

¹ Paul Thomas, *Beyond the Buzzwords: Coping with Change in the Public Sector*, *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 1996; 62; 5, page 22.

² Paul Thomas, *A baker’s dozen of hints for would-be change masters* :

1. Recognize that imitation is not the same as innovation.
2. Recognize the need to balance confidence with realism.
3. Decide whether change should be represented as a transition or a continuous process.
4. Follow a strategy of small wins.
5. Reinforce constantly that significant change takes time.
6. Maintain a focus on long-term objectives.
7. Accept that conflict and struggles for power are an inevitable part of the change process.
8. Find the appropriate balance between consensus and confusion.
9. Expect to encounter resistance.
10. Encourage inquiry, debate, experimentation and learning.
11. Be prepared to manage the frequent gap between rising expectations and performance improvements.
12. Diffuse leadership.
13. Recognize that change is difficult...Work hard...but try to have fun.

in the PowerPoint slides for *Beyond the Buzzwords: Coping with Change in the Public Sector*, Presentation to the Institute of Public Administration of Australia-Sydney Division, March 20, 2008.

³ Kevin Lynch, *Fifteenth Annual Report to the Prime Minister on the Public Service of Canada*, for the year ending March 31, 2008, page 20. The report also contains the welcome comment that “This year, as one element of scaling back the web of rules, we are implementing the recommendations of the 2007 Blue Ribbon Grant and Contribution Programs, reducing the administrative burden for both recipients and government.”

I suggest there is useful research to be done within departments and perhaps at the School to identify the rules that innovative public servants with high personal integrity are now bending, or would like to bend. These rules should go to the top of the list for change.

Making connections

My second proposed area of research is making connections. It is obvious that innovation will be advanced by helping public servants better connect with new knowledge and with highly innovative people and institutions outside the public service. Indeed, this is the premise of the School's Innovative Public Management Research Fund, and of the Public Policy and Governance Portal project supported by the Fund.

The new technologies collectively referred to as Web 2.0 should be really helpful here. I will draw on Bill Gates' firm's somewhat hyped description of the features of the Microsoft SharePoint Server 2007 platform that we are deploying for the portal project:

1. **User Participation:** Institutions can boost organizational productivity by making participation in Web communities as seamless and easy as possible so users can collaborate and share content with one another. By making input easier and streamlining reporting and analysis, this new breed of application drives user adoption and unlocks the value of existing systems.
2. **Collective Intelligence:** Search and collaboration make it possible to use more of the knowledge found in public servants' heads and in the databases and unstructured documents across the organization. New technologies such as dynamic workspaces, wikis, and enterprise search for people and data deliver a platform for collaborating on complex and creative tasks. Increased access to information enables valuable analysis, while easy publishing of insights ensures that others can benefit from these insights. The result is a positive feedback loop that amplifies the power of many people working together.
3. **Rich User Experience:** A rich Web experience allowing users to use programs they already know to interact with new hosted services. They can take content offline or on the road. A rich, dynamic, responsive user interface enables users to drive the activity, rather than limit them to the constraints of fixed applications and screens.
4. **Data-Driven Architecture:** Organizations can access the critical data that exists in many different formats and locations such as databases, documents, Web sites, content management systems, and archives. Metadata techniques can be used to help describe that data, making integration easier and data more relevant to users, and streamlining reuse across many applications. Users can combine data and processes from different systems in their own "mash-ups," creating entirely new applications.
5. **User-Driven Applications:** Users can create applications specific to their own needs. The shift of application development to the edge of the network is perhaps the most dramatic change for many organizations used to top-down solution models. The new models acknowledge that organizations simply cannot anticipate all of the creative solutions that occur at the edge in organizational units. On the Internet, these edge-created applications

Even discounting the marketing hype, people who use computers and the internet heavily in their work – which includes most people at this seminar – cannot help getting excited with the possibilities of Web 2.0. But these possibilities understandably raise alarm bells within government, primarily around issues of system security, Cabinet confidentiality, coherent communications, and potential embarrassment. For the same reason that Ministers have a right to expect that their Cabinet deliberations remain confidential, public servants do not want to see their speculative ruminations captured in digital form with the long-lived potential of being used out of context or with the intent to embarrass. On the academic side there are issues of intellectual property.

The Portal project includes plans and resources to supplement the digital interaction with face-to-face events where interaction can take place at a more human level outside the digital realm.

Evert Lindquist⁴ reminds us of other challenges with networks:

Networks at their purest (and presumably their best) are non-hierarchical and fluid in the sense of pursuing new information and opportunities, but this does not mean that agency and self-interest are not at play, and properly engaged, are best suited towards exploration and identifying the best experts for exploitation....networks do not magically create capacity, but liberate, lever or mobilize existing capacities to pursue new directions in different ways.

So the research question here is how to best use these networking techniques in ways that maximize their contribution to innovation while managing the problems associated with self-interest, leaks and embarrassment.

Having fun

My final proposed area of research is in the realm of human emotions: how best to apply findings from the various fields of “happiness research,” to the operation of the public service.

We can all look back on our own experience in projects and teams that were highly innovative and productive. What motivated us to put in the 60 hour weeks to get the job done and why did we find it so much fun? What’s going on in these situations?

Recent work in psychology and neurosciences helps us understand. The most relevant work has been done in the fields of neuropsychology (how the structure and function of the brain relate to specific

⁴ Evert Lindquist, “There’s more to policy than alignment: (or) Cultivating capacity, brokering insight, and fostering appropriate expectations in results-driven and loosely-coupled governance environments,” February 10, 2008 Draft, page 15, Canadian Policy Research Networks Inc. Lindquist also provides a list of good questions for the development of a research strategy: 1. What are some examples of innovation? (small or large, by design or serendipitous, etc.), 2. Where do innovations come from? (bottom-up, top-down or ginger secretariat, from outside -- other sectors or governments), 3. How do we recognize or capture innovation? (do we know them when we see them, do we recognize them, view them as mistakes or unaligned with objectives, etc.), 4. How do we diffuse and/or scale-up innovation? 5. How do we create the right environment for seeking, recognizing, and diffusing innovation? (experimentation, making errors, unaligned budgets, networks, organizational slack, etc.) 6. Given that the federal public service is so big and diverse, is it doing so badly? (e-mail correspondence with the author, March 5, 2008.)

psychological processes and overt behaviours), social psychology (how social conditions affect human beings), behavioural economics (how human and social cognitive and emotional biases affect economic decisions and the allocation of resources) and moral psychology (the ways in which people make decisions about issues that raise moral concerns).

Scholarship and experimental findings in these fields help us recognize the conditions under which individuals and groups will be most innovative and productive.

At the level of the individual, the research I have read suggests we should start by recognizing that we all work most innovatively, diligently and productively when our work makes us happy. If you ask senior public servants what they find most rewarding about their profession, they almost invariably mention three things: 1) working with interesting colleagues, 2) working in the service of public, and 3) working on intellectually challenging problems. These are exactly the kinds of situations that, according to the research, raise the level of neurotransmitters such as dopamine (the “happiness hormone”) in the brain. We humans are ultrasocial animals and have a basic drive to relate to others. Like many other mammals, we also have a basic drive to *make things happen*. We get an emotional reward from: 1) interacting harmoniously with others, 2) contributing to a cause larger than ourselves, and 3) voluntarily immersing ourselves in a task that is challenging but closely enough matched to our abilities that we can find creative solutions and get feedback at each step.⁵ Over time, this leads to friendships, membership in a valued group, and a sense of personal achievement. In other words, we are having fun.

At the level of the group, research suggests that we should start by recognizing that individuals bring a wide variety of talents, tastes and temperaments to the workplace. The public service office is a very human, complex, and sometimes emotionally messy place. In effective groups these diverse talents, tastes and temperaments are channelled in ways that contribute efficiently to the collective output. Some scholars suggest that in addition to the two “individualizing” values (*fairness/justice* and *harm/care*) there also exist three “binding” (i.e., group-oriented) values: *ingroup/loyalty*; *authority/respect* and *purity/sanctity*.⁶ The latter is what gives people the feelings that some ways of living and acting are higher and nobler than others. These three binding tendencies can be seen in effective groups of all kinds. In my experience, great public service leaders appeal to the same kinds of feelings that provide happiness in religious observance. The work experience is raised from “a job,” or even “a career,” to “a calling.”

Harnessing these powerful emotions is tricky in the public service. Creativity and commitment are all very well but emotions like ingroup and sanctity, or even friendship and fun, do not sit comfortably with rules aimed at preventing favouritism and promoting inclusiveness. If the public service wants to harness emotions in the way that innovative and effective organizations outside government routinely do, then we must think hard about how best to reconcile the competing values at play.

These are my three modest suggestions. I look forward to coming to the university seminar next year to hear how public service is more innovative by becoming less rule-bound, better connected and more fun!

⁵ Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*, Basic Books, 2006, pp 219-226.

⁶ Haidt refers to these values as “psychological foundations of morality.” See Jonathan Haidt, *Moral Psychology and the Misunderstanding of Religion*, and responses by the “new atheists,” David Sloan Wilson, Michael Shermer, Sam Harris, PZ Myers, Marc D. Hauser, and a response to these by Haidt at (http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/haidt07/haidt07_index.html).