

Exploring the New Frontiers of Public Administration

Article for Government Executive Magazine

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January 26, 2011

1. Introduction

In 2010, I had the pleasure of leading an international research network comprised of senior leaders to explore the new frontiers of public administration.

Six countries contributed: Canada and Brazil from the Americas, The Netherlands and The United Kingdom from the European region, Australia and Singapore from South East Asia and Pacific Regions.

Our approach was a disciplined and structured process of exploration bringing together the world of practice and the academia, multiple academic disciplines, and a diversity of experience.

Those involved shared a commitment to supporting the men and women who take on the challenge of serving the public good and the collective interest. We shared the view that, in spite of thirty years of reforms, most public organizations and public institutions are not yet aligned to challenges of the 21st century. To prepare government, we need new ways of thinking about old problems and different ways of addressing new and emerging complex issues.

Our discussions were enriched by five international roundtables and numerous case studies. The initial results of our work can be found at <http://ns6newsynthesis.com>. What follows is a summary of some insights from the work so far.

2. Increasing Complexity and Uncertainty

Governments have always been called upon to face *difficult problems*. Setting priorities, making choices has always been difficult. Eliminating a sizable deficit while preserving public assets that will be needed in the future and maintaining public support is a difficult exercise. It entails a delicate balancing act and careful judgment about multiple trade-offs.

Governments have always been relied on to undertake *complicated initiatives*. They are complicated because of their scale, scope or the intricate nature of the enterprise. Trade negotiations and sending a man to the moon are complicated exercises.

Governments have always been faced with *complex issues*, but they are now having to confront a growing number of such issues in an increasingly unpredictable environment. Global warming and terrorism are topical examples. Shocks, crises, global failures are characteristic of the world we live in. Their frequency and magnitude will continue to increase as the world becomes more connected, populous and interdependent.

Furthermore, a number of systems necessary to the functioning of modern society are becoming progressively more complex as the density of linkages and interrelationships increases. This is the case for food, water and energy supply, and for information, communication and financial systems.

Complex issues are multi-dimensional. They cannot be solved by breaking them apart. They require a *holistic approach*. They require a *participative approach* to develop a common understanding of the issue conducive of collective action and cooperation among multiple actors. Complex issues require *boundary crossing* among agencies and levels of government, and between the public, private and civic spheres. They require new forms of cooperation including hybrid organizations and co-production processes.

3. Citizens as Value Creators

We are used to thinking of government as the primary agent responsible for serving the public good and as the primary provider of public services. In this context better health means more hospitals, doctors or nurses. Better education means more schools and teachers. In all cases it means more public spending.

In reality the countries with the best population health or the best results in education are not the ones that spend the most per capita in these areas. In these countries, public results have become a collective enterprise. They have put in play the shared responsibility of citizens, families, communities, government and society. Modern technologies give them the means to expand their influence from public policy choices to program design, from program development to program delivery. This leads to new forms of collaboration and social innovations.

The traditional view of government as the primary public service provider runs the risk of crowding out the contributions people can make to achieve better public results. It may also lead to dependencies rather than building the resilience and solidarity of society. Most countries are lacking an accountability system, such as a robust reporting system on societal results, that gives proper recognition to the public value created by citizens. We are lacking a modern understanding of shared accountability for the collective results needed to encourage societal progress.

A government-centric approach reduces the range of options open to government. An excessive focus on efficiency obscures the potential for effectiveness that a broader perspective would reveal.

Going forward countries with an active citizenry, resilient communities and a civic spirit conducive of collective action will have a significant comparative advantage in pursuing an ambitious agenda.

4. An Expanded Public Space

There will always be circumstances where governments are well positioned *to act alone*. It is the case when governments can define the issue, take the necessary actions, and achieve the desired outcome on their own. It may also be the case in times of crisis when the collective interest demands it.

But it is not the case when the desired outcome is beyond the reach of government acting alone or when the active contribution of multiple actors is necessary.

The challenges resulting from an aging population, poverty alleviation or innovation are beyond the reach of the traditional instruments of the State. These results cannot be achieved simply by regulating, taxing or spending. That being said, in all cases governments have an important role to play.

The role of government is to explore and discover how best to lever the collective capacity toward the desired ends. Government is part of a complex web of dynamic interactions where government actions transform society and society transforms the role of government. In this expanding public sphere everything is connected and traditional boundaries lose meaning; the economic, social, ecological, technological and political systems are intertwined.

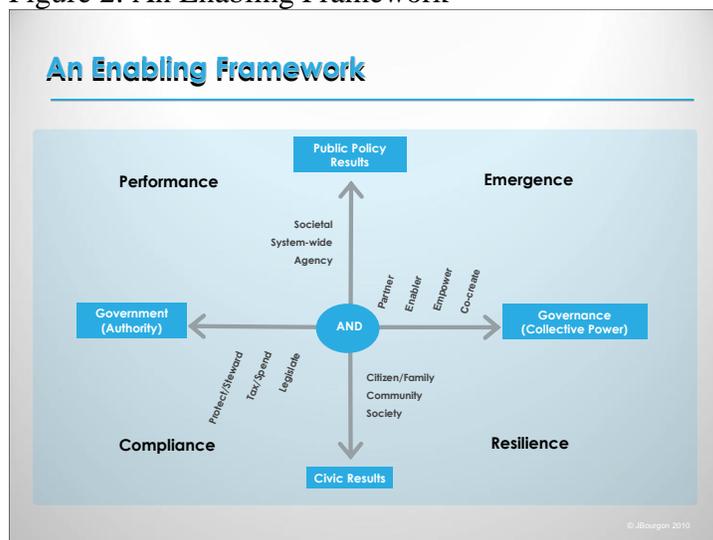
The best performing governments are those able to integrate in new and better ways policy decisions and implementation, politics and administration, capacity and aspirations. They focus on exploring how to adapt to one's changing environment ahead of time. They experiment in order to learn in practice how to mitigate preventable risks or to change the course of events in their favour.

Ultimately, serving in an expanded public space entails moving from multiple separations to multiple dynamic interactions, from a mechanistic view of the role of government to an evolutionary mode of governance.

5. Serving in the 21st Century: An Enabling Framework

The New Synthesis project has refined over time an enabling framework to guide practitioners. The framework is made of four vectors; two focused on results and two on how to achieve them. Taken together they map out a space of possibilities (Figure 2).

Figure 2: An Enabling Framework



The framework does not provide answers. It is a lens that helps to frame questions, to explore the range of options open to government, and to reveal the implications that various choices entail. The decisions can only be made in practice, in the context of each mission and in the unique circumstances of each country.

The New Synthesis framework proposes that the role of public organizations is to achieve results of increasing public value and to do so in ways that build the collective capacity for better results over time. This has a number of consequences.

First, this means that agency results are poor indicators of progress. In fact public organizations must assess their performance in the context of government-wide, system-wide and societal results.

Second, it means that public administrators must mediate the drive for efficiency with an equally important commitment to civic results. To do so, public services should be designed to encourage the active contribution of citizens, users and beneficiaries.

The active contribution of users has a number of advantages. It builds a strong foundation for more ambitious public results. When done well, it contributes to self-reliance and community resilience. Finally, recent research reveals that participation contributes to well-being and improves life satisfaction.

Public administrators, citizens and other actors in society form part of a dynamic and interactive system of governance where the authority of the state is used in different ways to achieve different public results. This lays the basis for public results as a collective enterprise.

At the crossroad of these lines of force there are all kinds of tensions. This is where means and ends, evidence and preferences, policy decisions and implementation must be reconciled. It is also the space with the greatest potential for innovation and where issues, tools and capacities can be recombined in new and powerful ways.

The New Synthesis framework also delineates four interrelated sub-systems: compliance, performance, emergence and resilience.

A compliance sub-system is the foundation of good government. It ensures that society is governed by the rule of law. It defines the role of public institutions and ensures institutions, due process, transparency and accountability for the exercise of powers and the use of public funds. It gives form to the public values that have evolved over time.

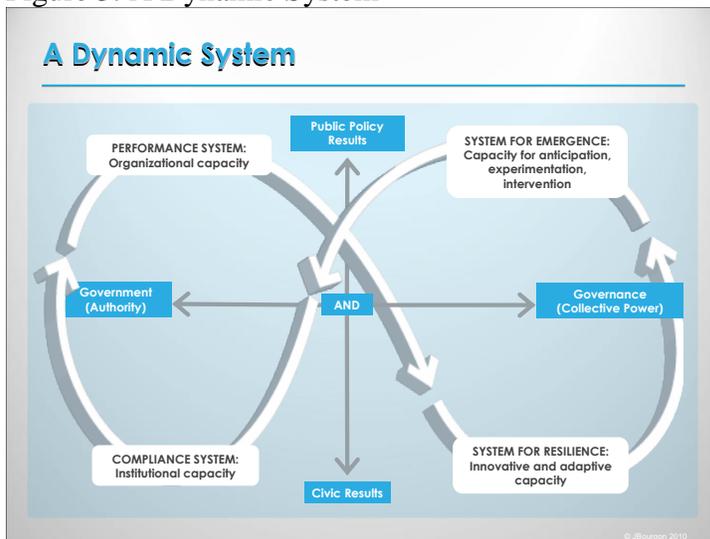
A performance sub-system transforms public purpose into concrete actions. Most public organizations were designed for the mass-production of predictable tasks. They perform best in a relatively stable environment that encourages codification and repetition.

However, the increasing levels of complexity and uncertainty that confront governments place a premium on their ability to “serve beyond the predictable”. In this context, new roles, skills and capacities are needed.

An *emergence sub-system* is needed to anticipate and explore emerging issues and possibilities. It serves to identify what might be, to improve decisions with imperfect knowledge, and to achieve better results even in the face of uncertainty and adversity. It requires the ability to reconcile the short timelines of modern politics with the longer timelines of achieving results on complex issues and through collective means.

A *resilience sub-system* requires experimentation and learning by doing. This is arguably where the most progress is needed and where it would be possible to reap the greatest benefits. Most countries are lacking a strategy to encourage experimentation in the public sector and to support social innovation. Public organizations generally show a low tolerance for risk taking not because of a lack of innovative ideas but because a “blame and shame” mentality has taken hold.

Figure 3: A Dynamic System



In the end everything must fit together and the sub-systems must operate in harmony. The New Synthesis framework is proposing a shift of considerable magnitude – from a closed system of government to an open and dynamic system of governance able to co-evolve with society.

The Next Phase

The next phase of the project is to expand the conversation by bringing together 300 leaders and future leaders from government, business, academia and civil society from 40+ countries to discuss what some countries are doing to prepare and to face the challenges of the 21st century.

This process begins on October 4-5, 2011 in Ottawa at the NS World Forum on Public Governance. The theme of the event is “Governing in Turbulent Times”. The Governor General of Canada, His Excellency The Right Honourable David Johnston will welcome participants and deliver an opening address. The Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to Cabinet, Wayne Wouters, will bring a Canadian perspective to the challenge of governing in turbulent times.

Learn more about the Forum by visiting <http://nsworld.org>.