

Distinctively Public Sector

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The New Synthesis Initiative

The New Synthesis Initiative was launched five years ago to help close the gap between conventional theory of public administration and the realities of public service in practice.¹

Two years later, we developed a conceptual framework that is substantially different from the traditional model of public administration inherited from the industrial age. The New Synthesis Framework is “distinctly public sector.”

The NS Framework is intended to serve as a road map to guide practitioners as they explore the range of options that government can use to solve real-life challenges.² But the road map is not the journey. Civil servants must craft their own narratives of change. They must invent a New Synthesis adapted to their own unique context and circumstances. Different choices will set countries on different trajectories and will have a significant impact on the overall performance of their country.

Since introducing the NS Framework in 2012, we have tested the application of the NS Framework with practitioners. To do so, we designed an NS Master Class program³ and two NS Workshops, one for the most senior civil servants and one for junior managers.⁴ The Workshops were designed as an applied discovery process to allow practitioners to explore the NS Framework in the context of the real-life challenges they were facing in their daily work.

The Workshops used four lenses through which participants explored the various dimensions of the New Synthesis Framework:

- Positioning to benefit from a broader mental map
- Leveraging the power of others
- Engaging the contribution of citizens as value creators
- Synthesising a powerful narrative of change

The Workshops ran from 3 to 6 days and were each tested in at least two countries to assess their relevance in various contexts and domains of practice.

Today, I will share the insights we gained through the Workshops and the lessons that participants taught us. These lessons are a useful barometer of the issues at play in various countries and the work needed to prepare public institutions to be fit for the times.

1 You can find the full history and list of publications at www.nsworld.org.

2 For more information on the NS Framework, see: Jocelyne Bourgon, *A Self-Help Guide for Practitioners*. (Ottawa: Public Governance International, 2013).

3 Jocelyne Bourgon. The First New Synthesis Laboratory for Master Practitioners. *Ethos* 13, (2014): 88-95.

The Need for Change

Before I talk about the lessons learned through the NS Master Class and Workshops, we need to take a step back to understand why they are lessons in the first place. The question is: why is now the right time for change?

Today's public administration is essentially the one inherited from the industrial age.⁵ It is designed for the mass-production of standardised services. This model was useful during the industrial period; it ensured that all citizens had access to health care, education, electricity. It provided the legal framework for a market economy. It ensured that citizens had access to phone and modern communication technologies and provided the infrastructure necessary for economic and technological advancement. This model was and remains essential for nation-building and for the effective functioning of modern government but it will be insufficient to face the increasingly complex challenges that have begun to define the post-industrial era.

Over the last 30 years, too many reforms have had too little impact. By and large, reforms do not transform the existing order. On the contrary, they preserve it by making incremental changes.

Years of reforms did not prevent the financial crises, the real estate crises or the sovereign debt crises that have plagued many countries. We have learned that markets are not self-regulating and that too much reliance on government creates dependency and reduces the natural resilience of people and society. We need a new balance to harness the collective potential of the market, the state and civil society.

Years of reforms did not prepare governments for the impact of the digital revolution. Governments are struggling to adapt to the changing political landscape of our hyper-connected society. We need a different relationship between government and citizens.⁶

Years of reforms did not build the capacity of governments to work across boundaries. The silos we created are as entrenched as ever—even at the expense of achieving better results for society or providing better services to citizens.

Nonetheless, this is a good time to be in government. The demand for change from citizens and elected officials has not been this strong in a long time. More and more people realise that we need change if governments and society are to adapt to a rapidly changing landscape and find solutions to the challenges that lay ahead.

⁵ Jocelyne Bourgon, *A New Synthesis of Public Administration*. (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011).

⁶ Jocelyne Bourgon. Reclaiming Public Administration. Paper presented at the Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy Lecture

Series held in Saskatoon, Canada on April 22, 2014. Available from http://www.schoolofpublicpolicy.sk.ca/News_Events/JSGS%20Feature%20

This is a good time to re-think the role of government in society, re-frame societal challenges from a different perspective and re-conceptualise public administration in a more contemporary context. There comes a time when reforms must give way to a more profound realignment of ideas and to the transformation of the ideas, conventions and institutions that have served us well in the past. We live in such a time.

Institutional changes are difficult at the best of times. Interests are vested, and the prevailing order is entrenched. But preparing public institutions to be fit for the times may be the most important challenge that public servants face today and their most important contribution to preparing society for what lays ahead. Leading transformation starts by challenging the conventional ideas and established practices that have contributed to generating the challenges we need to address.

Transformation requires a different way of thinking about the role of government in society. It requires a capacity to harness the energy of dynamic relationships between government, citizens and a multitude of actors to propel society forward.

Positioning

Public institutions, public organisations, and civil servants serve a public purpose. This is their *raison d'être*: the essence of their role in society.

To lead public sector transformation, we need to re-discover and re-connect with the broad public purpose that public agencies, public policies and public institutions are meant to serve. This purpose always exceeds the capacity of any single person, agency, program, or service.

Articulating the purpose ensures that the actions and decisions of the public sector are grounded in their core mission. It helps explain decisions in a manner that reconciles short-term actions and the longer-term needs of society. It helps frame meaningful conversations between elected officials and the professional civil service. It brings greater clarity to the outcomes that governments want to achieve.

Public transformation begins with clarity of purpose: the reason governments do what they do. Once we achieve this clarity, any number of roads can lead to the desired outcomes. The way we frame a public policy issue or position the contribution of public agencies has a direct impact on the solutions that will be found and on their ability to address current challenges.

Positioning the contribution of public agencies (services and programs) in the broader context of system-wide and societal results reveals the multiple dimensions of the challenges we face as a society and the need to co-operate across government and across sectors.

The broader the view, the greater the range of options available to government to bring about solutions. A narrower view leads to sub-optimal results and imposes a higher cost to society by crowding out the valuable contribution of others.

Positioning has a number of implications for the public sector, including 'public

purpose before form and process.’ There is no point encouraging compliance with every conceivable internal process requirement if nothing is produced or if nothing of value is created. Public administration is not about the inner workings of government; it is about the relationship that binds government, citizens and society together to produce results of value to society and to propel society forward.

Learning from Practitioners

The Workshops highlighted several key findings based on the practical experiences of participants.⁷

Lesson 1: Positioning is more powerful than we originally thought. It had a profound effect on how the participants approached the challenges they were facing. Most of them reached their “aha moment” when they realized that their broad public purpose and the contribution they could make by working with others towards the desired outcomes really were one and the same. In the words of a participant, “Suddenly, it all made sense, it felt whole.”

People managing prisons, water systems, building roads or protecting children at risk came to similar realisations.

Lesson 2: Many senior managers do not give enough thought to the public purpose their agency serves. Participants found it challenging to focus on the big picture. Their instinct was to ‘fix’ the problem at hand, but quick fixes may be no fix at all.⁸

I believe there are many reasons for this. The relentless pressure placed on public sector leaders does not leave them much time to think beyond the crises of the day. This presents a number of risks. They tend to hold on to existing practices long after their useful life. They become vulnerable to expedient solutions and the “fashions of the day” without challenging their relevance or considering the potential for perverse effects. The quick fix of choice this year may be ‘lean’ or ‘commissioning’, last year it was ‘nudging’ and ‘design thinking’. Over time, public servants are losing confidence in their ability to solve the complex issues and the intractable problems we face as a society.

Thirty years of reforms have focussed on the inner-workings of governments. This has led to a narrow and distorted view of the role of government in society. People end up thinking that there is nothing special or unique about the public sector, and that managing in a public sector setting is the same as in any other sector.

We are at risk of losing sight of the role that only the public sector can play. People are not born citizens; we become citizens as we accept the constraints and the responsibilities of living as part of a broader community. Public institutions are essential in transforming people into citizens and in building a citizenry willing to share a future together.

7 Jocelyne Bourgon, *The New Synthesis in Action: A Retrospective of the NS Labs Conducted in 2013-2014 Based on Singapore's Experience*. (Ottawa: Public Governance International, 2014).

8 Civil Service College, *Summary of Findings: New Synthesis Laboratories Conducted in Singapore March 2013 to March 2014* (Singapore: Civil Service College, 2014).

Public institutions are needed to build a civic spirit conducive to collective actions. They provide checks and balances to reconcile the pursuit of individual and collective interests. They build the collective capacity to invent a better future.

People in government—whether they are fully aware of this or not—are modern philosophers giving new meaning to the pursuit of a good life by working to support a just society and intergenerational fairness. They are meta–system designers to bring together the contribution of the state, the market, and civil society in a manner that promotes the collective interest. They are the stewards of the collective interest and the insurer of last resort. They are public institution builders as they work to build the capacity of government to continuously adapt to changing needs and circumstances.

The irony is that we have internalised a narrow and distorted view of the role of government in society at the very moment we need it most to steer society through a profound transformation process that results from living in a post-industrial era. If government is not up for the task, then who?

Leveraging

In every country, a limited number of people have the legal right to use the authority of the state to tax, spend, make laws and enforce them through coercive measures in order to achieve results. The position they hold gives them these rights. Elected officials and members of the professional public service are members of this small group of people.

However, an increasing number of issues exceed the capacity of government working alone. Issues such as an aging population or workforce, increasing income and employment inequalities, poverty alleviation or climate change require a co-ordinated approach across multiple boundaries in government and across sectors.

Leveraging is a way of exploring how to pool resources, knowledge, know-how and capabilities, wherever they may reside, to achieve the desired public policy outcome at the lowest overall cost to society and with the fewest unintended consequences (there are always some).⁹

Smart governments achieve better results than others with less effort and resources because they find ways to build on the strengths of others and to put their assets to productive use.

Learning from Practitioners

The Workshop contributed to three key insights into the power of leveraging in practice.

Lesson 1: There are always enough resources to make progress if we pool available assets and capabilities. A leveraging exercise accepts no “ifs or buts”. It

9 Jocelyne Bourgon. The First New Synthesis Laboratory for Master Practitioners. *Ethos* 13, (2014): 88-95.

starts with the world as it is and with the resources available at the time. Leveraging brings coherence to the contribution of a diversity of actors and means.

Lesson 2: Working across multiple boundaries is a characteristic of governance in the 21st. century. It is needed to:

- Address the complex issues that transcend bureaucratic boundaries. A holistic approach is needed to meet the challenges of serving in the 21st century.
- Support government-wide priorities that require the active contribution of multiple departments and agencies as well as from various agents in society. A co-ordinated approach is needed to help government achieve better results for society at a lower social cost.
- Meet citizens' expectations for more integrated public services through a diversity of channels. A citizen-centred perspective is needed to ensure that reforms are long-lasting.

Lesson 3: Public innovation requires a diversity of approaches. Behind every successful public program, there are also pockets of unresolved issues and underserved citizens whose circumstances do not fit the program design. A diversity of approaches is needed to help close these gaps. The most important capability to prepare government fit for the challenges of the time is recombinant innovation--the ability to re-combine issues, tools, means and resources in new ways that improve results and move society forward. This requires a capacity to initiate intervention with imperfect knowledge, to experiment, learn as you go, and course-correct as learning takes place. Leveraging is about giving yourself permission to explore what might work best in practice by suspending, at least for a time, personal preferences or ideological biases. Leading transformation is a transformative journey.¹⁰ This means challenging conventional ideas, fashionable practices, or single-minded solutions to problem-solving. For those who aspire to change the world, transformation starts with an open mind.

Participants discovered that the most *fashionable practices* may not be the wisest way forward. They found it difficult to resist the pressure from people in positions of authority and from powerful external lobbies advocating for their solution of choice. Let's be clear, the commitment is to serving a public purpose, it is not to specific means. If nudging helps achieve better results, use it; if commissioning works in your context, do it.

If these approaches are not relevant to the challenge at hand, put them aside and keep looking for what would lead to better societal results. You may find, like many of the participants, that a combination of some conventional ways, old ideas and new practices working in synergy together provide the greatest potential for progress.

Lesson 4: There is a need to build public administration systems to support the 'stewardship role of government'.

Governments are the stewards of the collective interest in all circumstances, whether they play a lead role or rely on the strength of others, whether they are

10 Jocelyne Bourgon, Leadership as an Integrated Process of Change. *Public Sector Digest*, Fall (2014): 33-37.

the primary service provider or use intermediaries. Governments bear a special responsibility to monitor progress and to initiate corrective action if necessary.

Decision-making, accountability systems and monitoring and evaluation systems have been designed for a time when public agencies were the main service provider. These systems and processes are not fit for this time. Participants found that many administrative systems do not support shared responsibility and collective efforts and that a lack of appropriate systems stalled their efforts.¹¹

Lesson 5: Senior leaders have a stewardship responsibility to prepare the civil service for the future and to re-think the role of the Centre of Government.

The more diverse the sources of information and the more dispersed the range of levers available to government to produce results, the broader the range of possible permutations and the more important the role of the professional public service.

The public sector has no monopoly on policy advice or on service delivery. The mastery we expect from a professional civil service extends beyond what government can do on its own. The civil service should be recognised for its ability to combine knowledge, skills, capabilities and a diversity of means to achieve better results. It should be valued for its capacity for *meta-system design* to bring together the contribution of government, citizens and society to create a better future, improve the human condition and ensure intergenerational fairness. It should be known for its capacity to act as one, serve as one and learn as one to support the government of the day. The role of a professional public service is to identify ideas that put the collective interest into action and to transform ideas into reality.

Participants acknowledged that civil services display silo mentality, insularity and aversion to risk-taking. The system was designed to encourage these behaviours. That said, what was generated by design can be changed by design—if there is a will.

Engaging

Engaging citizens as value creators transforms the relationship between government and citizens from one of dependency to one of mutuality and shared responsibility for public services. It completes the New Synthesis map and makes the whole system dynamic.

The relationship between government and citizens is changing. There is no turning back. Citizens are breaking out of their subservient relationship with government (vote, pay taxes, obey the law).

They expect to have a say and to play an active role with government in matters of interest to them. Digital communications and IC technologies are giving them the means to ensure that their voices are heard.

11 For more on the stewardship role of government, see: Jocelyne Bourgon, *A New Synthesis of Public Administration* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011).

The way government responds to these challenges will impact its capacity to adapt to the changing political landscape of the world we live in and the relationship of trust between government and citizens.

In every country, there are powerful examples of how a different sharing of responsibilities between government and citizens contributes to better results, higher user satisfaction and lower costs.¹²

The New Synthesis Workshops have deliberately adopted a narrow approach to exploring these practices, limiting the exploration to practices that entail a sharing of responsibility for the final outcomes. The most promising practices include:

- The co-creation of policy responses. Co-creation draws from the assets of users, service providers and communities to forge a policy response adapted to the context in which it will be used. Co-creation transforms policy-making from a top-down decision-making process to an experiment in progress.
- The co-production of results. Co-produced results are generated in a way that engages the direct responsibility of users or beneficiaries of public services, when users and public agencies make better use of each other's assets to generate better public outcomes. Monitoring results is an integral part of co-production.¹³
- Enabled self-organisation initiatives. Self-organisation exists naturally. The NS Initiative focuses on how government can create an enabling environment that encourages individuals to take charge of solving problems of interest to them in manners that also advance the collective interest. Technology enabled self-organisation is a particularly promising avenue.

There are many examples of these practices on our website at www.NSworld.org. A self-help guide is also available online to help you explore these concepts on your own.¹⁴

Learning from Practitioners

Lesson 1: There is always a better way of sharing responsibilities between government agencies and civil society. Every participant agreed on this, whether they managed land transportation, social housing, mental health services, or libraries. In fact, participants found that co-production opened up new avenues between a government-centric approach and reliance on the market. In this space, they found it possible to solve problems that had previously remained intractable. The potential is enormous, so we should tread carefully.

Public servants need a much deeper appreciation of when government is best positioned to act on its own and when it is well advised to work with citizens and their families and communities as co-creators of the desired public outcome. In between, there are an infinite number of permutations that may operate simultaneously.

¹² Jørgen Tholstrup, *Empowering Patients to Need Less Care and do better in Highland Hospital, South Sweden*. 2012. Available from: <http://www.govint.org/good-practice/case-studies/empowering-patients-to-need-less-care-and-do-better-in-highland-hospital-south-sweden/>

¹³ Christian Bason, Johanne Mygind, and Rune Sabrow. *Co-Production: Towards a new Welfare Model*. (Copenhagen: Mindlab, 2014).

The workshop helped the participants gain confidence about their judgement and about how to reduce risks.¹⁵

Lesson 2: A vast continuum of choices is open to government. Participants found it necessary to disentangle concepts of communication, crowd sourcing, consultation, town hall meetings, etc. These are worthy practices in their own right but they entail little, if any, sharing of responsibility between public agencies and citizens. More than any other aspects of the NS Workshop, engaging revealed the need for new skills in the public service.

Synthesising

Synthesising is the ability to create a powerful narrative of change for a better future. It combines efforts to re-position challenges using a broader mental map, re-think the relationships between government and society, and engage a multitude of actors under a single narrative capable of providing an impetus for change. It brings together the elements of a New Synthesis adapted to the real contexts that practitioners face in practice.¹⁶

Creating a powerful narrative of change is the special responsibility of public sector leaders. Leaders give shape to the change process. They must articulate the storyline that explains why the change agenda is worthy of collective efforts.

A narrative of change is not static. It evolves as progress takes place. The narrative of change is used to inform the change process as it occurs. Senior leaders must give voice to the transformation process to mobilize support.

During an exploration phase, leaders help their organisation explore the gaps between current realities and aspirations for the future. This phase helps create a shared awareness of the challenges at hand. During the transition phase, the current reality co-exists with the early actions needed to close the gaps previously identified. This phase is particularly challenging.

During the transformation phase, the new reality is starting to take hold. It is important to generate a shared narrative of change that reflects the collective aspirations of the participants for a new reality.

In the end, the organisation will generate a new narrative that captures its new reality. This is their New Synthesis. It will become the basis from which future transformations will take shape. A New Synthesis is never definitive and will continue to evolve alongside changing circumstances, contexts and challenges.

¹⁵ See: Jocelyne Bourgon. *The New Synthesis in Action: A Retrospective of the NS Labs Conducted in 2013-2014 Based on Singapore's Experience*. (Ottawa: Public Governance International, 2014).

¹⁶ For more on the Narrative of Change, see: Jocelyne Bourgon. *The New Synthesis in Action: A Retrospective of the NS Labs Conducted in 2013-2014 Based on Singapore's Experience*. (Ottawa: Public Governance International, 2014).

Learning from Practitioners

Lesson 1: Crafting a narrative of change involves preserving and building on the assets already available. Not everything is changing. Existing assets and capabilities of on-going value provide the foundation for future change. The challenge for people leading reform is to discover how old and new practices as well as existing and new capabilities will co-exist harmoniously.

Lesson 2: Crafting a narrative of change for public sector transformation requires an integrated approach to achieve better agency and public service-wide results. It entails individual, shared and collective responsibilities for preparing the civil service for the future. Too much emphasis on agency results limits the capacity to achieve better system-wide and societal outcomes.

Lesson 3: A public service wide narrative of change encourages alignment to a broader cause. It helps individuals and agencies align their contributions with the overall transformation agenda.

Learning from practice, the participants discovered that the most successful narratives of change were positive statements that encouraged mobilisation by building on the pride of past achievements and unleashing the power of common aspirations for a better future.

Conclusion

Decades of reforms focussing on efficiency did not prepare government for the challenges of serving in a post-industrial era. Efforts to reduce the role of government did not generate more trust. Efforts to run government like any other business did not generate more confidence in government, in public institutions, or in the future.

This is a good time to rediscover some very old truths. The public sector serves a public purpose. Its role is to define, promote and advance the collective interest, and produce the goods that we consume collectively. Public institutions promote citizenship to reconcile people's interests as part of a broader community.

It is a good time for a “distinctly public sector” view of public administration. Not out of arrogance but out of a deep conviction that this uniqueness makes it valuable.

This may be the best time in a long time to search and shape a new balance between the role of the state, market and civil society.

This IS a good time to be in government!

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