

Leading Transformation: The New Synthesis in Action

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Introduction

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. 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 their overall performance.

CAPAM used the New Synthesis framework to frame the discussion during the biennial conference in Delhi, India, in 2012. The theme of the conference was “Government Fit for the Times”. CAPAM invited the participants to explore what is different about serving in the 21st century and how to prepare government for the challenges that lay ahead. The theme of the biennial 2014, taking place over the coming days, is an invitation to pursue the conversation.

The theme of “Leading Transformation: New Conversations” aptly signals the need to go beyond public service reforms that by and large preserve the existing way of doing things in order to lead society and the public sector through a transformation process, adapt to the changing landscape of the world we live in and respond to the changing needs and expectations of citizens.

It is a privilege to deliver the opening keynote at this conference that brings public sector leaders together from across the Commonwealth. It is heartening that the Commonwealth Secretariat, CAPAM and the host country have considered the New Synthesis Initiative worthy of your consideration.

¹ Jocelyne Bourgon, *A New Synthesis of Public Administration; Serving in the 21st Century*. (McGill -Queens University Press, 2011).

Serving in the 21st Century

We live in a turbulent world.

Governments are facing issues of increasing complexity that respect no boundaries and where the political, social, technological and environmental factors are intertwined. They are called upon to serve in a disorderly world inhabited by 7 billion people at a time when there is every reason to believe that the frequency and magnitude of disturbances, from natural disasters to pandemics, will continue to increase.

Governments are serving in an interdependent world, prone to volatility and unpredictability. Our hyper-connected world generates great wealth but also instability and increasing inequalities as the disruptive capacity of modern IC technologies outpaces the absorptive capacity of many countries.

Governing in the 21st century may not be more difficult, in absolute terms, than the challenges faced by those who came before; but it sure is different.

A Changing Landscape

It is useful to remind ourselves of the scale of the transformation brought about by the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution was the result of several nearly simultaneous innovations. It took shape over several decades. At first, the transformation was progressive and incremental. Eventually, it reached a point of inflection and changes occurred very fast.²

People in government today are called upon to steer their society through a transformation process that may be as deep and as steep as the Industrial Revolution, the result of multiple factors including the Digital Revolution, new information and communication technologies, as well as many other global changes.

The key questions for people in position of responsibility in government today are: What do we need to do to prepare government for the challenges that lay ahead? What do we need to do to ensure that the capacity of government to invent solutions will keep pace with the increasing complexity of the challenges we are facing as a society? What can governments do to steer their society through a profound period of change?

An Industrial State Fit for the Industrial Age

Looking back is always useful. It helps to see more clearly what is already emerging. Governments always play an important role in the performance of their country; in periods of profound transformation, they play a critical role.

² See: Ian Morris, *Why the West Rules--For Now: The Patterns of History and What They Reveal*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010).

Governments played a key role in ensuring the successful transition of countries undergoing a dual transformation brought about by industrialisation and democratisation.

They built the state apparatus -- as we know it today in most OECD countries and across the Commonwealth. They created public institutions able to govern with legitimacy and accountability.

The rule of law became the governing principle of modern society. It provided the predictability and stability needed to build a strong market economy and for civil society to flourish.

They gave form and meaning to the concept of citizenship as a mix of rights and responsibilities. As citizens, people can rise above their differences and voluntarily accept the constraints and responsibilities that come from being a member of a broader community

Governments, each in their own ways, combined the potential of a market economy and of democratic principles to propel their society forward.

Those who came before us have served well. They have given us a solid foundation. This model of government, that I described as the Industrial State, was and remains a powerful model of government, essential for nation building. It was fit for the time.

But no institution is fit for all times. For that, they need to respond to the changing needs of citizens and adapt to the changing landscape of the world we live in.

Different times require different ways of thinking and openness to different ways of doing things.

Fifteen Years of Crises, Thirty Years of Reforms

Fifteen years of crises ranging from financial and real estate crises, a great recession, sovereign debt crises, growing inequalities, pandemics and natural disasters have revealed the weaknesses of our institutional arrangements. Too frequently, governments were left in a reactive position unable to anticipate, prevent or reduce the risks for the most vulnerable in society.

Thirty years of public sector reforms did not prepare governments for the challenges that lay ahead. Too many public sector reforms have focused on the inner workings of government.

The irony is that public institutions are showing signs of weaknesses at the very moment we need them the most to steer society through a profound period of change. People in government today will need to go beyond reforms that, by and large, maintain the existing way of doing things. They are called upon to lead public sector transformation and to steer society through a process of change.

This is a good time to be in government. It is a good time to re-discover some old truths, re-think the role of government in society and re-conceptualise public administration in a manner that resonates in a more meaningful way with the world we live in.

This has been the focus of the New Syntheses Initiative for the last five years and I will draw from this work in this address.

Preparing Government Fit for the Time

Public Purpose Comes First (Positioning)

One old truth worth rediscovering is that public institutions, public organisations, do not simply provide services, they serve a public purpose. This is the essence of their contribution to society. This is what makes them unique and valuable. This is what gives meaning to their actions and decisions. Public organisations cannot fulfill their mission by relying only on improving services or increasing their productivity.

Focussing on the broad public purpose has a number of implications for government. First, it shifts the focus of attention from agency results to what really matters—making a difference for citizens and society. Second, it reveals the multidimensional nature and the complexity of the challenges we are facing as a society. Public results of value to society require co-operation across government and across sectors.

Stories People Told Me

This is the story of weather forecasting agencies in Senegal and Kenya.

The mission of weather forecast agencies is not simply to produce accurate weather forecasts (agency results). It is to make sure that this information reaches those that can use it to make better decisions, achieve better results and reduce risks for society.

In the case of the weather forecasting agencies in Kenya and Senegal, a focus on better societal outcomes led to a better use of weather forecasts by government agencies, rural dwellers, farmer associations and communities vulnerable to the risk of flood. It meant better crops, better yields and better preventative actions.

You can find similar examples in every country. I will mention the rehabilitation of ex-offenders in Singapore and Children at risks in New Zealand.³

3 A full description of all of the cases referred to during the presentation can be found on the NS website at: www.nsworld.org

Implications

Leading public sector transformation means that articulating the public purpose must come first. Public purpose is more important than means and process requirements. Public organisations must position their contribution in the broader context of system-wide and societal results.

An excessive focus on agency results generates a narrow vision and at times a distorted view of the role of government. In the end, the way we frame public policy challenges and position the role of public organizations has a direct impact on the solutions that will be found and the results that will be achieved...Public purpose comes first!

Leveraging the Power of Others

In every country, a limited group of people have the legal right to use the authority of the State to achieve public results. This is the authority to tax, spend, regulate and ensure compliance through coercive measures. You are among them.

Public office holders are granted this right as a result of the position they hold and because of their duty to serve the collective interest.

However, an increasing number of public policy issues exceed the capacity of government. They cannot be solved simply by regulating and spending; they require the active contribution of multiple agents across government and across sectors to bring about a viable solution.

The challenge is not so much to figure out what government can do on its own but to discover what can be achieved by pooling existing knowledge, know-how, resources and capabilities wherever they may reside in government and society. The key question is how can government use its authority to lever the contribution of society as a whole?

Leveraging is a powerful concept.

An important finding in this area is that it is generally possible to make progress and to achieve better results, even in the most challenging circumstances, if we are able to harness existing capabilities and resources in support of a common cause. Another key finding is that producing public results is not the exclusive responsibility of government but a collective responsibility that entails a shared responsibility of government, citizens and every agent in society.

Leveraging entails a shift from a government centric to a governance focus.

Stories I Was Told

I could give the example of the Participatory Irrigation Management project in Thailand, where government shares the responsibility for the management of a

water reservoir in Dan Chang district with communities, farmers and key user groups.

We can learn about leveraging from the HIV-Aids Network in Botswana, where the government leads a vast ecosystem of partners to serve a common cause. Government ensures that a legal and ethical environment is in place, NGOs and community groups contribute to prevention and multiple service providers provide the care and support systems.

Implications

Leveraging has a number of implications for government. It requires new skills and capabilities including the capacity to work across multiple boundaries, manage multiple interfaces and steer vast ecosystems.

It requires the capacity to monitor results, an ability to learn as you go and to course correct as needed. Government is the steward of the collective interest in all circumstances.

It requires rising above the silos we have created.

Citizens as Value Creators (Engaging)

One of the most fundamental roles of government is to transform people into citizens and our diverse human communities into a citizenry willing to share and build a better future together.

People are not born citizens; we become citizens as we accept the constraints and the responsibilities that come as a result of being a member of a broader community. Public institutions create citizens.

The role of government is to build a civic spirit conducive to collective actions. It is to build the collective capacity to achieve better results over time.

Some of the most intractable problems of this time are not due to too much government, but to a lack of State able to forge a united citizenry governed by a common rule.

Citizens, sometimes at great risks to themselves, are breaking out of their subservant relationship with government. They expect to have a say in matters of interest to them. They want to play an active role with government in producing the results of greatest value to them. Modern technologies are giving them the means to ensure that their voices are heard.

The way governments choose to respond to these challenges will impact the overall functioning of their society. This also presents government with an opportunity for a different sharing of responsibilities with citizens that may generate better public results at a lower cost for society.

Stories to Learn From

In most countries, one can find examples of how governments are exploring new ways to engage the contribution of users and beneficiaries of public services as public value creators.

Some of the most promising practices include:

- Co-creation, co-design and co-production, when users and service providers make better use of each other's assets;
- Enabled self-organisation, when government creates an enabling environment that encourages people to pursue their individual interest in a manner that also promotes the collective interests.
- Technology enabled self-organisation, when modern IC technologies are used to enable people to address problems of interest to them by themselves or with others.

We have much to learn from E-Health points in Punjab, a technology-enabled co-production project that generates better health outcomes and makes better use of the time of medical staff or from co-creation Hub in Nigeria that incubates innovative projects and empowers users of public services to influence the development of new services.

We can learn from the experience of people with disability in Denmark, who worked with government to co-create a better policy and better services. It led to reduced costs and improved users satisfaction. We can learn from the cyclist association in London that found ways to reduce cyclists' accidents.⁴

Implications

Co-production is more than talk, consultation or communication. It is a sharing of responsibility where government, users and beneficiaries of government services make better use of each other's assets in order to produce better results. Engaging the active contribution of citizens as value creators has a number of implications for government. It is not applicable or advisable in all cases. It is not "laissez faire"; it requires an active role by government to create the enabling conditions.

It requires clarity of purpose, clear rules of engagement and new skills. Government must know when to use these approaches, and how to use them well. It is not new, but has been neglected for a time. In our drive for efficiency, we have crowded out the contribution of citizens as value creators. There is great potential.

⁴ All examples are available on the NS World website at: www.nsworld.org

In Closing

Public administration is not about systems, structures and organizational charts. It is a relationship that binds government and citizens together and that propels society forward.

Our governance model has served us well. It is providing us with a solid foundation but different times require a different way of thinking and openness to different ways of doing things.

This is a good time to re-discover some old truths. Citizens are not simply customers or mere clients. They can be value creators.

This is a time for shifting the focus of attention from the efficiency of the parts to the effectiveness of the whole and from public sector reform to leading public sector transformation. This is a time for a more fundamental re-thinking of the ideas that served us well in the past and of the capabilities that will be needed in the future.

This may be the best time in a long time to forge a new balance between the role of the state, market and civil society that would prepare our society for the challenges that lay ahead

This IS a good time to be in government.



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