



NSLab

A New Synthesis Laboratory
for Master Practitioners

A Summary of Learning of the First NS Master Class Program Held in Singapore in March-May 2013

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A New Synthesis Laboratory for Master Practitioners¹

The New Synthesis of Public Administration is a journey of discovery aimed at *preparing governments to be fit for the challenges of their times and creating resilient societies fit for the future.*¹

The ideas behind the New Synthesis (NS) project began to take shape in 2006 when the International Institute of Administrative Sciences (IIAS) invited me to deliver the Braibant Lecture that year. In that lecture, I exposed my early thinking about the need for a New Synthesis of Public Administration and what some of its components might look like.² While the NS project began as an individual journey, over the years, it came to involve numerous people and organizations from around the world.

Following an exploration phase in 2007-2008, a prototype for an NS began to take shape, a research program was launched and resources were mobilized in Australia, Brazil, Canada, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Singapore) to advance the work. By the end of 2009, the project had come of age. It was supported by a dedicated team and a collaborative network of practitioners and academics from 24 organizations in the six countries. The group became known as the NS6.

In 2010, the focus turned to deepening, enriching and continuing to debate the concepts relevant to the project. The centrepiece of this work was a series of international roundtables that brought together world-renowned experts and leading practitioners in a process of deliberative discussion on themes relevant to the NS journey. The roundtables were sequenced to accumulate and validate knowledge, and to build on the findings and experience gained along the way. From March to December 2010, roundtables took place in The Hague, Ottawa, Rio de Janeiro, Singapore and London, as did a series of group discussions in Perth, Melbourne, Canberra, Wellington and Auckland. Through a disciplined process of exploration and discovery, a degree of convergence began to take shape.

In 2011, the focus turned to capturing the results of five years of work in a book entitled *A New Synthesis of Public Administration: Serving in the 21st Century*³ to encourage the dissemination and discussion of the key findings in academic circles and among practitioners interested in public service reform. It was hoped that the NS would be “powerful enough to transform the way we think of the role of government in society; coherent enough to guide actions and support decision; flexible enough to embrace a diversity of contexts and modern enough to prepare government to be fit for the times.”⁴

A theoretical framework substantially different from conventional public administration had been presented. But would it work in practice? Would it be relevant in countries undergoing very different stages of development? Would it be sufficiently robust to work in a diversity of domains of practice: from law enforcement to environmental protection, from public safety to social services and social justice?

The next year was dedicated to disseminating the findings and expanding the conversation with public service leaders beyond the six countries—especially to reaching out and testing the relevance of the NS Framework in developing countries. This was done during the CAPAM biennial conference that took place in Delhi in October 2012.⁵ The Institute of Public Administration of Canada (IPAC), with the

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To be published.

support of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), launched a virtual international conversation on how the NS transforms the approach to capacity building in developing countries.⁶

The NS project had entered a new phase known as NSWorld. The main effort during this phase was to build an inventory of international public sector reform initiatives to test the applicability of the NS Framework in a diversity of contexts. The inventory currently captures examples from some 40 countries all over the world.⁷

By the end of 2012, the elements were in place to test the relevance of the NS Framework in a diversity of domains of practice. The concept of a laboratory emerged during discussions with the president of the Civil Service College (CSC) in Singapore in July 2012. It was seen as a way to test the NS Framework in practice, in real life situations and in a diversity of domains.

The Purpose of the New Synthesis Laboratory (NSLab)

The New Synthesis (NSLab) Laboratory was a ground-breaking experiment that took place in Singapore in spring 2013. It brought together “master practitioners” with the NS project leader to test the robustness of the NS Framework in a variety of domains of practice.

The lab sought to achieve outcomes at two levels:

- Individual: to equip practitioners to lead initiatives, achieve complex results and commit to tackling the outcomes identified in the real-life case studies they brought with them; and
- Institutional (system-wide): to create a shared commitment among participants to a collective effort for advancing public sector reforms in Singapore.

Laboratory Participants

Senior public officials from 17 organizations in domains as diverse as central ministries (Public Service Division, Finance), line ministries (Communications and Information, Education, Social and Family Development) and statutory boards (Immigration and Checkpoints Authority, Land Transport Authority) participated in the lab. Drawing from key NS findings, lessons learned from other countries and the wealth of participant experience, the NS project leader played the role of “Master Weaver” of a New Synthesis adapted to Singapore’s context and circumstances.

Laboratory Design

The NSLab was designed for interaction-based learning among experienced practitioners based on their knowledge and experience, and informed by the NS Framework. It was not a course in the traditional sense. There was no right or wrong answer. Instead, it was a process of discovery; a synergistic and collective learning experience involving an encounter among master practitioners and the project leader. It was about working with the questions of participants to advance their thinking, deepen their understanding, develop their capacity to auto-correct and expand the space of their practice through conversation, exploration, discussion, probing and challenging.

The NSLab made extensive uses of case studies and switched back and forth between the individual responsibilities of the participants as senior decision makers and their collective responsibilities as public sector leaders for system-wide results. Participants pursued an open exchange of ideas, experimentation and discovery in six one-day sessions held over 12 weeks. The two-week cycle allowed

participants time to absorb their new-found knowledge and test some of their ideas before returning to the lab.

The NSLab challenged participants to continually move between exploring concepts, learning from practice and integrating findings:

- *Exploring concepts:* By engaging critically in the NS concepts and exploring the implications of NS as a mental map to face complex problems and intractable issues.
- *Learning from practice:* By sharing and acquiring insights from each other and from other places, contexts, disciplines and practices about what is being done and can be done to prepare government for the challenges of the 21st century.
- *Integrating findings:* By developing an awareness of what can be converted into practical application in their context and by integrating learning and insights into an NS narrative adapted to Singapore that encourages a systematic approach to capacity building.

The first three lab sessions explored the NS key findings, drawing from and working through participant's real-life case studies. Before the first session, each participant provided a short paper on a challenge they were facing or a transformation they were committed to achieving. Participants had the opportunity to engage critically with the NS concepts and explore the implications of the NS mental map to address complex problems and intractable issues they had to address. Invited resource persons and additional case studies (local and international) gave participants insight on what was being done and could be done in practice. After each session, participants were asked to rethink their challenge and reframe it in light of what they had learned by adding a short section to their paper. To assist them, the Master Weaver reviewed each paper and provided a written analysis of key points. She worked one-on-one between sessions with participants to assist them in reframing their challenge. Two participants were invited to present the repositioning of their case at the start of each subsequent session.

The last three sessions reached beyond particular initiatives to identify and explore the capabilities needed to build a dynamic, co-evolving system of governance in Singapore, and to draw out the potential roles of participants and the contributions they could make to advance these ends. In these sessions, participants heard from resource persons about the changing landscape in Singapore from a public service and academic perspective. By integrating their learning and insights about the NS Framework and its concepts with deeper conversations among themselves, participants developed a joint narrative on the current Singapore context and transformation agenda.

Laboratory Session 1: The Power of Positioning

NSLab Session 1 explored how the power of positioning helps reveal the multi-dimensional nature of complex issues and the need for cooperation across government and its systems.

Public sector leaders are accustomed to achieving *agency results*. Agency results provide the basis for reconciling inputs, outputs and responsibilities. They are the traditional basis for accountability for the use of taxpayer funds and for the exercise of delegated authority. Agency results provide the basis for improving efficiency.

Participants discovered that by focussing only on agency results, they were viewing their challenge through too narrow a lens. They learned that, changing the way they think about the mission of a public agency can change the way they shape policy responses, deliver services, relate to others and

engage citizens. Positioning shifts the focus of attention from an agency results to system-wide results and societal outcomes.

Public servants are “all part of a bigger cause.”⁸ The challenge is to frame issues in a way that invites and allows others inside and outside of government to contribute to system-wide and societal results. Focussing on *system-wide results* invites agencies to join in a coordinated effort to achieve shared goals. Focussing on societal results invites the private sector, civil society and citizens themselves to contribute to a collective effort to achieve shared goals. The bigger the view, the easier it is to uncover how to connect the pieces.

Positioning is not definitive. It evolves as new knowledge and experience become available. But it is a necessary step to leveraging the cooperation of others and engaging the cooperation of citizens, communities and society as value creators.

Laboratory Session 2: The Power of Leveraging

NSLab Session 2 explored the power of leveraging. Participants learned the need to work with others, inside and outside of government, to move results up the value chain of societal and civic results.

Leveraging shifts the balance between government and governance. It is a search for balance between relying on government as the primary service provider and building on the strength of others to achieve results of higher public value. It is about recognizing that government does not have to “do it all” for collective interests to be served. Leveraging is about understanding that traditional approaches become unsustainable and unaffordable if it means doing more of the same and spending more. Leveraging is about exploring and uncovering different ways of doing things. It implies a recombination of what governments are best positioned to do on their own with their capacity to empower others to contribute. It is about pooling capacities across government and across sectors in order to raise everybody up. Leveraging is about discovering a natural point of inflection. This is when government, with the least amount of effort and economy of resources, can achieve the greatest impact by working with others. This is also when the pursuit of individual interests can be made to converge in such a way that advance the collective interest

Participants learned that leveraging can serve many purposes. It encourages emergence and builds resilience by creating conditions that allow others to act to address, resolve and find solutions to issues of interest to society. It contributes to better outcomes through a mutual responsibility. It helps government to tap the collective intelligence of society to detect, anticipate, course-correct and mitigate risks, leading to the improved likelihood of successful outcomes for government and society.

Participants identified a number of factors that would enhance their capacity to leverage the contribution of others. Leveraging requires an understanding of how services and programs fit together in the broader context of system-wide and societal outcomes, and an appreciation of the role of contributors to achieve the desired outcomes. Leveraging requires new skills and capabilities in the public service to understand the perspectives of others and to create the conditions that encourage them to engage in a collective effort.

Laboratory Session 3: The Power of Engaging

NSLab session 3 explored the power of engagement. Even when working together, public agencies may not be able to achieve some results or solve intractable problems. An increasing number of public policy issues require the contribution of citizens, communities and society as *value creators*.

Participants were reminded that there are many approaches to addressing public policy issues, and that engagement is one approach among a diversity of practices that must co-exist.

Government acting alone and in a conventional manner will likely remain the preferred approach in a number of instances. It is therefore important to clarify when government is best positioned to act alone, when it would be unwise to do so, and when the desired outcomes can only be achieved with the contribution of users and beneficiaries as value creators.

For instance, government is best positioned to act alone when it is able to frame the issues on its own; the policy response depends primarily on expert knowledge; the government has the tools to achieve the desired outcome on its own and can acquire the relevant information to adjust policy response as circumstances warrant.

There are situations where government cannot achieve desired outcomes on its own or where doing so leaves unresolved issues or underserved citizens. In such cases, participants explored the NS focus on measures that transform the relationship between the government and citizens to one where there is mutuality and shared responsibility for the production of public results. This is the case for self-organisation and technology-assisted self-organisation, co-design, co-creation and co-production. In these cases, service providers and beneficiaries work together to produce a shared public outcome. While retaining the power of decision, government might be well advised to involve stakeholders and citizens for a variety of reasons, including improving decision making, garnering support or encouraging cooperation. Government has a broad range of options available for this purpose, including information sharing, communications, consultations or co-production.

The NS argues that successful engagement requires clarity of purpose, an appropriate mode of engagement for the desired outcome, clear rules of engagement and a good understanding of the risks associated with each form of engagement.

In the context of the NS, engaging means:

- Involving users and beneficiaries in the co-creation, co-design or co-production of public outcomes to maximize the impact and minimize the cost to society; or
- Empowering communities and individuals to self-organize to solve issues of interest to them; this contributes to building resilience.

With a variety of approaches available to government, the best approach is the one that achieves the highest net public value and the most resilient society.

Ultimately, government is and will remain the steward of the collective interest in all circumstances, no matter whether it is acting alone or in partnership. The more dispersed the authority and delegation of power is, the greater the importance of the stewardship role. This puts a premium on the capacity of government to anticipate, connect, shape the context, monitor and self-correct to ensure coherence, mitigate risks and optimize outcomes.

By the end of NSLab session 3, participants had successfully applied the key components of the NS Framework to their own challenge. They understood that *positioning, leveraging and engagement* cannot be used in isolation but work together as a dynamic system to explore the expanding space of possibilities open to government. Governing in the 21st century is a search for balance and a process of discovery.

With the key components of the NS Framework tested against the challenges facing 17 master practitioners from a variety of domains, it was clear that the NS Framework was robust. The focus then shifted beyond particular challenges to explore a collective agenda. What capacities are needed to build an adaptive government and a resilient society in Singapore? Could the NS Framework be used to create *A New Synthesis for Singapore*?

Laboratory Session 4: A Dynamic and Adaptive State

NSLab session 4 marked a shift to the application of NS concepts in Singapore's context. Participants joined in a collective effort to map out the capacity-building needed in the public sector and in society to support the Singapore government's transformation agenda for "a better home" and "a more resilient society."⁹

Participants heard first-hand about the thinking behind the agenda for change from those at the helm and from an outside thought leader. They debated what would be needed for them, personally and collectively, to give meaning to government-wide priorities. They identified the gaps between desired outcomes and the current reality, and started to explore what government could do to bridge the gaps.

Participants began a rich conversation that highlighted that successful public sector reforms are a search for balance among economic well-being, social well-being, quality of life, wellness, intergenerational fairness etc. to propel society forward. This search never ends. Successful public sector reforms build the capacity of governments to evolve with society, to adapt to changing circumstances and to influence the course of events in a way that favours the collective interest. This requires building resilient societies that can absorb shocks, adapt to the changing landscape of the world and prosper in all circumstances.

Laboratory Session 5: Capacity Building

NSLab session 5 focussed on capacity building. Capacity building refers to building the capacity of people and institutions. Nothing happens without people, and nothing lasts without institutions.

Participants explored the need to change the way government thinks about policy making from a decision-making process to a reciprocal and interactive process that encourages a collective effort and a shared responsibilities for public results. Public policy responses forge a relationship that engages the responsibility of government, citizens and society. This, in turn, transforms the relationship between the professional public service and elected politicians.

Participants addressed the need to enhance the capacity of public organizations to work across multiple boundaries. They identified measures (below) that would help prepare Singapore's public service to be fit for the challenge of its time, including:

- the ability to frame issues and manage activities based on societal outcomes;
- the ability to engage with clarity of purpose and intent, to produce public results with others; and
- the leadership capacity to transit from old to new paradigms to serve the greater public good.

Laboratory Session 6: Closure

NSLab session 6 closed the experiment. During sessions 4 and 5, participants developed a narrative that spoke to the current context and transformation agenda in Singapore. In session 6, participants were

given a written summary of the evolution of their case. This was an important exercise. The Project Leader documented their journey of discovery over the course of the 12 weeks. The journey showed a broadening of the range of options considered, a holistic view of the issue, an appreciation of the importance of the contribution of others in government and beyond. Above all, it framed the issue in term of public purpose and public policy outcomes. It brought a societal and a citizen perspective to the search for solutions. It is hoped that the case summary will assist participants pursue the discussion with their colleagues.

Session 6 involved a free-flowing discussion of their case, the emerging narrative for Singapore and the implications for public servants.¹⁰ Participants reflected on how their challenge fit into the larger picture. They were reminded of the importance of balancing traditional ways with new approaches to address their challenge in a way that is appropriate to their mission, context and circumstances.

Why the NS Lab Was a Success

The success of the first NSLab can be attributed to a number of factors:

- *Dedicated Support by a Lead Organisation.* The Singapore Civil Service College (CSC) was the lead organisation in the NSLab experiment. The dedicated support of CSC's management and staff was key to the success of the NSLab. They demonstrated a strong sense of purpose, and showed the willingness to innovate and to experiment in the face of unknown risks and uncertainties. These are essential characteristics to prepare public organizations fit for the challenges of their times. There is no substitute to leadership and to a commitment to learning.
- *Designed for Practitioners:* The NS Framework was developed by a practitioner for practitioners. The NSLab was learner-centric, with improvements throughout the process to ensure that each session met the needs of participants.
- *Commitment of Master Practitioners:* The participation of 17 senior public servants, each of whom invested time and effort to updating their personal challenges and took the time to share their learning.
- *A Master Weaver:* A successful lab requires a master weaver who has strong teaching and communications skills, an ability to synthesize complex ideas and an extensive knowledge of public administration, of the NS framework and of lessons learned in other countries.
- *Real-life Case Studies:* The use of real-life case studies permitted richer learning. As the cases evolved, participants were able to use the NS Framework as a different lens to view their particular challenge and make changes that would result in better outcomes.
- *Time to Absorb:* The break between sessions gave participants time to absorb, consolidate and integrate their learning.

Where to Next

The NSLab demonstrated that the NS Framework is robust, that it works in a variety of domains and that it can help to develop agile and skillful public sector practitioners. In the coming year, I plan to work with the Civil Service College in Singapore to design programs for public officers at levels above

and below the first NSLab cohort and to disseminate the learning to a wider audience. Participants in this first lab have agreed to meet again in six months and in one year's time to reflect on their progress.

Over the coming year a dedicated effort among interested partners will be made to develop a handbook that will provide practitioners anywhere in the world with a set of resources to guide them in using the NS Framework to address their particular challenges. Opportunities will be sought to continue to experiment with the NSLab approach in countries facing different challenges in very different circumstances.

And so the journey continues...for there is no end to the search for good government and good governance.

¹ For more on the New Synthesis Framework see: <http://nsworld.org/findings>.

² Jocelyne Bourgon, "Responsive, responsible and respected government: towards a New Public Administration theory," *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 73, no. 1 (2007): 7-26.

³ Jocelyne Bourgon, *A New Synthesis of Public Administration: Serving in the 21st Century* (Kingston, Ont.: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007).

⁴ Bourgon, *A New Synthesis of Public Administration*, 2.

⁵ For more on the CAPAM biennial conference, visit: <http://events.capam.org/2012-biennial-conference>.

⁶ IPAC paper?

⁷ This documentation is available online at: <http://nsworld.org/content/about-ns-world>.

⁸ Jocelyne Bourgon, "New Synthesis Laboratory for Master Practitioners: Moving Ideas to Action—Key Findings," CSC Working Paper, May 2013.

⁹ For more on Singapore's transformation agenda, see: <http://oursgconversation.sg>. (Need specific reference?)

¹⁰ Bourgon, "New Synthesis Laboratory for Master Practitioners."

Jocelyne Bourgon, "Exploring the new frontiers of public administration: the New Synthesis project," *Canadian Government Executive* 17, no. 3 (March 2011). Accessed at: <http://www.canadiangovernmentexecutive.ca/transformation/r-evolution/item/233-exploring-the-new-frontiers-of-public-administration-the-new-synthesis-project.html>.