
Excellence and Innovation in Public Administration

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There has been enormous change in the public sector over the last thirty years. Some of the changes have been far-reaching and significant, others localised and job specific. We could start from below and go into a typical office and we would notice the differences, or we could take a helicopter view of the system as a whole and notice how it now relies on partnerships with the private sector and the community to deliver many of its services. Even the language has changed from "administration to "management".

Pressured by politicians from above, stakeholders and the media from the flanks and citizens from below the public servants have often had little choice but to accept the need for change. It's called innovation and it's said to mean progress for all concerned, but most importantly the citizenry.

Note too that reform can be generated internally by middle management and frontline staff. Indeed the evidence we have tells us that most public innovation comes from these two layers - and is internally driven rather than a response to crisis or political pressure. All too often, notes Geoff Mulgan, "the work of these every day innovators tends to be hidden from view, except when awards push them to prominence"¹. Consequently, he says, public sector agencies should have "teams with a specialised role to organise and advance innovation" and governments should provide political and administrative space for innovation². At all levels officials - elected as well as non-elected - should be on the lookout for new things to do or new ways of doing what is done now.

Innovation happens in many ways and at many levels. It is accepted best practice along with strategic government, performance management and community engagement. It has become part of the contemporary theory of public value. Indeed it is linked to these by our overarching aim to produce better outcomes for the public, both objectively and subjectively.

In discussing the subject a range of issues are raised - some ideological and some practical.

Ideology and Innovation

The ideologists ask: what is the purpose of government and how do we need to change it? Those to the right argue that the less government we have, the better. It follows that innovation means a wide ranging program of privatisation and contracting out of government services, including

¹ Geoff Mulgan, Ready or not? Taking Innovation in the public sector seriously, National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts, London 2007.

² Geoff Gallop, Leadership and politics today, Banksia Lecture, Murdoch University

that of change management itself. That means more political control over the public service to ensure small government is delivered.

What we see here is a model for public sector innovation backed up with a philosophy based on self- help, community initiative and commercial endeavour.

It's a strategy that has friends in many places - free market think tanks and private sector providers keen to take up the opportunities that come with such a strategy.

Support, however, is wider than this. There are many community activists who see bureaucracy as the problem and who agree that localised and personalised solutions are necessary. They may disagree with the right on questions related to the type and level of taxation but not on how to deliver services.

Reference to community activists reminds us that ideological interest in innovation comes not just from the right but also from the left. They believe wide-ranging government initiative is necessary to achieve the aspirations of the community in respect of the economy, society and environment.

This left-of-centre approach is less ideological these days. It accepts that a mix of delivery mechanisms will be needed and that efficiency in delivery is important, and can benefit from private sector-type thinking.

In other words the left doesn't want to revolutionise the public sector but rather to reform it. In this endeavour it has many friends - public policy think tanks, interest groups concerned about inequalities and a range of social entrepreneurs. Pragmatic business men and women often join the ranks of "the true believers" as well.

Innovation, then, is ideologically contested territory. It involves values as well as evidence and public servants should never forget that when charting a course for themselves and the agencies within which they work.

Politician, Performance Management and Public Sector Activities

This leads me to the practical reasons why we focus on innovation. It happens and the logic and process of what is involved needs investigation and analysis. Inevitably we are taken from theory to practice, from policy to politics.

Too often we forget that the public sector involves not just public servants but politicians. It would be a very rare occurrence for the politicians to present the public service with a blank sheet on which to draw their own maps of services and service delivery.

The relationship forged between the two could mean the difference between effective and ineffective government. Consider this - ministers and governments come and go, crises aren't uncommon, and public opinion and the responses to it can be fickle. It's a world in which the media carry influence and seek to use it. It's a world of appearance and reality. What the rest of us may call "the short term" is today and tomorrow and the day after that for many who participate in and comment on politics.

Ministers may be change agents or conservatives, risk takers or risk averse. They like to take the credit for public sector success but blame the public servants when things go wrong. This can encourage public service caution in all matters related to change.

Secondly, it is the case that public sector changes are subject to an extensive regime of monitoring and evaluation that goes beyond politicians and the media. We live in the era of performance management- auditors, the ombudsman, and parliamentary scrutiny. Indicators are endorsed and targets set. No matter what the government of the day or the resource allocations that have been made these are requirements that cannot be ignored.

Note, too, that it's not just a case of outputs and outcomes, there is also the matter of process and public interest requirements that surround it. Acting in the public interest may not always be easy to define but that doesn't change the fact that it is a legal obligation in our system of government and there are agencies like the Corruption Commission that have the powers to find out whether that is happening.

The very existence of these agencies, and the powers they have, doesn't necessarily encourage caution but does make interest in and diligence about change important. Indeed in some circumstances the "no change/steady as you go" approach may undermine performance in a world of changing technology and expectations.

Thirdly, we need to recognise that the public sector is made up of not just a range of portfolios like health, education, planning etc but of activities - law and policy making and all the advisory structures and personnel that surround that, the provision of services to the community and not just those like schools and hospitals but also policy-based assistance and programs, regulation and the enforcement of law, and the all-important management tasks in areas like finance, human resources and information.

Advising, serving, regulating, enforcing and managing are all part of the scene.

I make reference to the role of values, the uncertainties of politics, the reality of monitoring and evaluation and the variety of activities involved to emphasise the difficulties of establishing what has been called "a culture of innovation".

In the private sector competition makes innovation a commercial necessity. It's all about the bottom line in a globalised world. In the public sector it is important too but not a necessity in the same way.

There are more rules and expectations about what can and cannot be done. The rewards of success and the penalties of failure don't always fall to the right people. One size doesn't fit all.

Leadership is the Key

What it all comes down to is leadership, both political and bureaucratic. The role of leadership is threefold -to keep alive and advocate for the idea itself, to keep in touch with developments both here and overseas and take the opportunities when they present themselves. That requires courage as most action occurs in the face of uncertainty. It can't and it shouldn't dominate all thinking and practice - the world needs its regularities and its certainties, particularly as they relate to the law and public policy. Change for change's sake is never a good idea.

However, change that improves the ethics, efficiency and effectiveness of government is always a good idea. Indeed our system of government has institutionalised this very objective in a range of accountability and integrity agencies that are always on the lookout for failures in administration and gaps in policy. They don't just investigate they recommend.

In other contexts I've spoken about the type of political leadership needed in today's world**. Advocacy in respect of the big issues and what needs to be done to address them is particularly important and not something that can always be embraced by the bureaucratic class, at least in the public arena. Innovation needs its champions and if they don't emerge from within the political parties it's going to be all that much harder to make it happen.

So much better it is too if politicians embrace the ideas of strategic and holistic government, public engagement over ends and means and outcomes-driven policy. However, in a world of short-termism and media driven and defined populism this can't be guaranteed.

What then is the role for public service leadership?

Public servants can bring clarity, definition and knowledge to the subject of innovation. They should be the repositories of knowledge about their own agencies and their own responsibilities. They should know what has worked and what hasn't worked. They should be in touch with what is happening on the front line and what is happening in the backroom. Independently from government they should be developing a view as to the future of their work and how external influences will affect it. Some scenario planning or SWOT analysis never goes astray.

Particular ministers and governments may not be focussed on good policy or the long-term but that doesn't mean the public service can't think about and plan for the future. Good public sector leaders need to bring not just political savvy to their work but also strategic energy to their agencies. They need to be ready for action should the call come.

Secondly, they shouldn't forget that despite all the limitations and constraints - political and legal - changes can be made from within. I've already referred to the research that indicates the importance of internally-driven innovation, much of it responding to particular needs. Public sector leaders need to be on the lookout for opportunities and supportive of staff who display initiative.

More importantly it demonstrates that however poor the incentive structures may be public service idealism is not to be underestimated. It lies behind the improvement agenda and the means to keep it active and energised - open channels of communication, stakeholder and public engagement around service delivery, research and professional development, and collaboration across government and with industry and community.

Putting it more directly, we need to acknowledge that public value and its realisation is not just a matter for politicians, the public service can add value not only in the way it relates to government but also in the way it promotes, facilitates and evaluates innovation in practice.

However, recognising the context and the limits within which this enterprise is undertaken is vital. This is part of what it means to have political awareness or political savvy. It means recognising when caution is necessary and radical change is possible. A good public service leader will be an educated opportunist.

This takes me to the issue of public sector leadership generally. The lists of skills and capacities that are produced in the textbooks are excellent - emotional intelligence, interpersonal effectiveness, communication transaction skills, policy and program knowledge, and change management expertise. However, they need to be complemented with this overarching instinct for and understanding of political realities. Indeed for the public service to defend and promote its role as a "system within a system" it needs leaders with real strength of character (= the courage to act), political nous (= the capacity to "read the tea leaves") and management skills and agility (= the ability to deliver).