

LEADING CHANGE IN THE PUBLIC ARENA

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Abstract:

The public arena is constantly exposed to social and economic pressures, forcing governmental organizations to question their capacity to change and to rethink their leadership status.

First, we will provide an overview of the importance of leadership in achieving successful change, which is undoubtedly recognized through the academic literature on public leadership. Then, drawing on the concept of organizational change, this article explores the role of public leaders as change agents and illustrates empirical evidence that support the positive effect of change-oriented leaders actions in the public context.

Key words: public leadership, change-oriented leader, organizational change

JEL classification: D73, H19

Introduction

In this “dark times” (Nabatchi, Goerdel, & Pfeffer, 2011), the urgency of significant change is crucial in both public and private sector. The differences between the two sectors (Bozeman & Rainey, 2000; Van Slyke & Alexander, 2006) and the nature of public work – “institutional setting, public expectations, and freedom to act” (Box, 2008, p. 75) makes the task much more difficult. With influences from the political and economic environment or “a chaotic environment” in Farazmand (2009) view, some may argue that public organizations are more resistant to change than private organisations or they change constantly making difficult the process of implementing and sustaining long-term change (Fernandez & Pitts 2007). Scholars gathered at Minnowbrook III (2008) conference reached the conclusion that solving complex problems that define these “dark times” is a function of leadership (Nabatchi, Goerdel, & Pfeffer, 2011) and according to Yukl (2002), “leading change is one of the most important and difficult leadership responsibilities” (p. 273). The British government’s report on *Strengthening leadership in the public sector* points out the importance of leadership in meeting the unprecedented challenges facing public services (Performance and Innovation Unit, 2001).

“Public sector change is a risky business” (Kee, Newcomer, & Davis, 2007, p. 154) and, at the same time, new skills, knowledge and attitudes are needed (Farazmand, 2009). In this context, the question if governmental organizations have the strength to change (Fernandez & Rainey, 2006a) is relevant.

Change and leadership

The number of articles focusing on organizational change in public administration journals is quite small (Fernandez & Rainey, 2006a). The subject is considered by Fernandez and Pitts (2007) “one of the enduring issues in the study of public administration and organization theory” (p. 324). As Fernandez and Pitts (2007) and Stewart and Kringas (2003) rightly observe, organizational change is mostly drawn on administrative reform research. O’Reilly and Reed (2010) introduces the concept of “*cascade of change narrative*” which “represents higher order changes such as globalization and changes in modern society as requiring shifts in the politics of nation

states, which in turn place new requirements on the public sector to change and modernize, which in turn present the introduction of restructured public service organizations [...] as inevitable requirements of the new contextual realities” (p. 966). This “cascade of change” is associated with the narratives of public service reform, legitimizing it and creating “an onus on leaders and leadership as the form of agency by which these pressures and changes are addressed and new services are developed” (p. 967).

Getha-Taylor, Holmes, Jacobson, Morse, & Sowa (2011) associate change with progress outlining that it is one of the most important values of all leadership conceptions. The importance of good leadership in achieving successful change is recognized in public administration literature (Stewart & Kringas, 2003). In attempting to define administrative leadership, Van Wart (2003) explains that “leadership can focus strictly on the ends (getting things done), the means by which things get done (the followers), or aligning the organization with external needs and opportunities (which can result in substantive change)” (p. 221). In Kellerman and Webster (2001) view, public leadership is a “dynamic process in which the leader(s) and followers interact in such a way as to generate change” (p. 487). They define a leader as “one who creates or strives to create change, large or small” (p. 487). Farazmand (2009) relates change with the concept of building administrative capacity in a context of “rapid globalization characterized by hyper-competition, hyper-complexity, and hyper-uncertainty” (p. 1017). Van Wart (2011) illustrates some examples of leadership research in the public sector with an emphasis on change. Therefore, Fernandez and Pitts (2007) “investigated the array of factors enhancing or diminishing change in an educational setting”, Wright and Pandey (2010) “found more transformational leadership at the municipal level than has been assumed by scholars” and Washington and Hacker (2005) “studied the critical need for public managers to fully understand policy changes for better implementation” (p. 96). Kee and Newcomer (2008) discuss “change in the public interest” meaning “acting for the good of the general members of society” is “at the center of all public change and transformation initiatives” (p. 7).

Organizational transformation

The connection between change and transformation has been a research subject in the leadership and public administration literature. Farazmand (2009) defines change as a “transformational force” (p. 1008) and Van Wart (2011) identifies change as one of the key elements that have received considerable attention in transformational leadership research.

Exploring the links between change and transformational leadership, the “new paradigm” (Bass & Riggio, 2006, p. 3) introduced by Burns (1978) and further developed by Bass (1985) has been a research subject for scholars like Denhardt and Campbell (2006) and Eisenbach, Watson, and Pillai (1999). Van Wart (2003), in his review of public-sector leadership theory, states: “The transformational school emphasized vision and overarching organizational change” (p. 217). The author further proposes a public leadership agenda where “comprehensive leadership models that integrate transactional and transformational elements” (p. 225) must be submitted to more empirical research because of the demanding request of change skills and vision articulation. Transformational leadership is considered a type of change-oriented leadership (Fernandez, Cho, & Perry, 2010; Van Wart, 2003). However, Fernandez, Cho, and Perry (2010) distinguish between the two in terms of instrumental means in achieving change, with transformational leadership emphasizing more intrinsic rewards. Kee, Newcomer, and Davis (2007) advocate for a transformational stewardship approach in leading public sector change.

In the process of leading change, Kotter (2007) identifies eight steps in transforming organizations. But Kotter's plan is built in a corporate context and its success in a public one may be questionable. Conversely, Fernandez and Rainey (2006a) describe eight factors serving as a "compass" for public managerial leaders "seeking to find their way amid the sustained, persistent, and challenging pressures for change they confront daily" (p. 173). Tabel 1 presents these two perspectives and, in particular Table 2 details the eight factors for achieving successful organizational change in the public sector.

Tabel 1: The process of leading change: a public-private perspective

Kotter (2007)	Fernandez and Rainey (2006a)
<i>The private perspective</i>	<i>The public perspective</i>
Establishing a sense of urgency	Ensure the need
Forming a powerful guiding coalition	Provide the plan
Creating a vision	Build internal support for change and overcome resistance
Communicating the vision	Ensure top-management support and commitment
Empowering others to act on the vision	Build external support
Planning for and creating short-term wins	Provide resources
Consolidating improvements and producing still more change	Institutionalize change
Institutionalizing new approaches	Pursue comprehensive change

Tabel 2: Determinants of Successful Implementation of Organizational Change in the Public Sector

FACTOR	DESCRIPTION
Ensure the need. <i>Managerial leaders must verify and persuasively communicate the need for change.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Convince organizational members of the need and desirability for change. ■ Craft a compelling vision of change. ■ Employ written and oral communication and forms of active participation to communicate and disseminate the need for change.
Provide a plan. <i>Managerial leaders must develop a course of action or strategy for implementing change.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Devise a strategy for reaching the desired end state, with milestones and a plan for achieving each one of them. ■ The strategy should be clear and specific; avoid ambiguity and inconsistencies in the plan. ■ The strategy should rest on sound causal theory for achieving the desired end state.
Build internal support and overcome resistance. <i>Managerial leaders must build internal support and reduce resistance to change through widespread participation in the change process and other means.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Encourage participation and open discussion to reduce resistance to change. ■ Avoid criticism, threats, and coercion aimed at reducing resistance to change. ■ Commit sufficient time, effort, and resources to manage participation effectively.
Ensure top management support and commitment. <i>An individual or group within the organization should champion the cause for change.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ An "idea champion" or guiding coalition should advocate for and lead the transformation process. ■ Individuals championing the change should have the skill and acumen to marshal resources and support for change, to maintain momentum, and to overcome obstacles to change. ■ Political appointees and top-level civil servants should support the change.
Build external support. <i>Managerial leaders must develop and ensure support from political overseers and key external stakeholders.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Build support for and commitment to change among political overseers. ■ Build support for and commitment to change

	among interest groups with a stake in the organization.
Provide resources. <i>Successful change usually requires adequate resources to support the change process.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provide adequate amounts of financial, human, and technological resources to implement change. ■ Avoid overtaxing organizational members. ■ Capitalize on synergies in resources when implementing multiple changes simultaneously.
Institutionalize change. <i>Managers and employees must effectively institutionalize changes.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Employ a variety of measures to displace old patterns of behavior and institutionalize new ones. ■ Monitor the implementation of change. ■ Institutionalize change before shifts in political leadership cause commitment to and support for change to diminish.
Pursue comprehensive change. <i>Managerial leaders must develop an integrative, comprehensive approach to change that achieves subsystem congruence.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Adopt and implement a comprehensive, consistent set of changes to the various subsystems of the organization. ■ Analyze and understand the interconnections between organizational subsystems before pursuing subsystem congruence.

Source: Fernandez & Rainey (2006b, p. 7)

Analysing them, we consider that *vision* is the most important element in this process. Kotter (2007) calls for a sensible and sound vision, otherwise the transformation effort will be in vain, leading the organization in the wrong direction. The change process requires support from the others (followers), in this sense Fernandez and Rainey (2006a) arguing that only a compelling vision will provide it. In a similar vein, Eisenbach, Watson, and Pillai (1999) highlight the strategic, motivational, inspirational and the commitment role of a good, clear and appealing vision “that takes into consideration the underlying needs and values of the key stakeholders” (p. 85). Transformational change within public and private organizations necessitates a shift in the attitudes, values and beliefs (Chapman, 2002; Currie, Lockett, & Suhomlinova, 2009).

Leaders as change agents

Fernandez and Pitts (2007) ask: “Do managerial leaders serve as catalysts for change?” (p. 326).

O'Reilly and Reed (2010) identify three types of “new pressures” (p. 966) public organisations confront with:

- *Technological pressures* – generating new threats, but also new opportunities;
- *Organizational pressures* – promoting new ways of organizing service delivery;
- *Consumer pressures* – increased consumer expectations of service delivery.

They conclude with a statement from the British government’s report: “Taken together, these increased demands on organisations create a need for highly effective leadership and a requirement for new leadership skills” (Performance and Innovation Unit, 2001, p. 11). According to the the same report, there is a growing demand for leaders “to see through fundamental processes of change” (p. 9). Kee and Newcomer (2008) note that public leaders must cope with different pressures for change that emanate from “an aging and increasingly multisector workforce, resource constraints, new horizontal relationships [...], globalization, technology [...] and increasingly complex public problems” (p. 4).

The increasing pressures public leaders have to cope with, mostly in improving the process of delivering public services (Fernandez, Cho, & Perry, 2010; Performance and Innovation Unit, 2001) transforms organizational change in a critical contingency

(Fernandez, Cho, & Perry, 2010; Fernandez & Rainey, 2006a). In the academic public literature there is empirical evidence between change-oriented leadership and improved public organizational performance (Fernandez, 2008).

As mentioned earlier, *transformational leaders*, using a “compelling vision, brilliant technical insight, and/or charismatic quality” create changes in “deep structures, major processes, or overall culture” (Van Wart, 2003, p. 218). Box (2008) refers to *public professionals as agents of change* in the process of integrating progressive values (cooperation, knowledge, economics as means, limited inequality, earth as home) in the administrative work. In other words, it’s an alternative to Terry’s (2003) approach of the *administrator as conservator*, “preserving agency mission, values, and survival” (Getha-Taylor, Holmes, Jacobson, Morse, & Sowa, 2011, p. i87). The image of public leaders as change agents is also consistent with the *entrepreneurial role* promoted by Osborne and Gaebler (1992), also considered as a viable alternative to Terry’s (2003) conservator role (Getha-Taylor, Holmes, Jacobson, Morse, & Sowa, 2011). Similarly, Kee, Newcomer, and Davis (2007) argue that public leaders as *transformational stewards* “must pursue organizational transformation, while serving as stewards of their organization and core public administration values”. Not at least, leading change is one of the five competencies established by the US Office of Personnel Management (OPM) Executive Core Qualifications.

Conclusion

“Leadership counts” (Kettl, 2000, p. 13) and public leaders can make a difference (see Van Wart, 2003) acting as change agents in transforming public organizations and delivering better services to citizens. We conclude with a relevant remark for the purpose of our article made by Getha-Taylor, Holmes, Jacobson, Morse, and Sowa (2011) after three Minnowbrook conferences and which can be considered as an important issue for the future of public leadership research agenda: “A central theme across all three Minnowbrook gatherings and their subsequent influence on public administration theory and practice has been the development of public administrators who truly make a difference, who act as ‘agents of change’ to transform public problems into solutions that reflect a commitment to public values” (p. i83).

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