

## **GOVERNMENT EFFECTIVENESS**

BY

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I had a commonly blunt view of “the problem with government”: ineffectual, bumbling, uninnovative, sclerotic,... These and other assessments are harsh but not without merit. I know painting with a broad brush is unfair because it covers areas that it shouldn't: places that don't fit the description. That said, for those making these claims, the odds are favourable.

Over the years, countless approaches have been taken by senior government executives to remedy the condition. They have got by many names to varying degrees of success. Encouraging civil servants to be more like their private sector counterparts is one broad approach that's included weighting MBA with undue value, applying indiscriminate certification need, implementing methodologies like Agile and using the language if not the exact methods of the private sector.

None of this is necessarily bad... or good, in and of itself. But it obviously is not broadly effective. If it were, the situation would be changed or at least changing. Evidence suggests it is not. At least not faster than the Athabasca glacier is retreating. At the risk of repeating what others have said before and annoying government executives, here are some thoughts about why.

First, however, let me make clear that I—for one (and maybe the only one)—decidedly do not want my government to be fast, nimble, agile, innovative, etc. in normal operations. I actually prefer the ship of state to move slowly and solidly. To push the metaphor further, government should be like an aircraft carrier, not a frigate. That that's me.

There are places for innovation, and it would be great if government were effective and efficient—while being deliberate. Those places could include great projects, like a space program, instituting national healthcare (or fixing a broken national healthcare system). But I would rather focus on effective and efficient.

For reasons too vast to be summarized, civil servants are exceptionally level conscious. Not merely in the broad-swathe sense of "manager" v. "director," but sensitive to the umpteen numbered pay-grade levels within each. To an outsider, it's amusing. But it's problematic. Here's how.

There is an expectation that an "AB-04" employee has the skills, capability, and will—if not experience—to take on and perform certain tasks that have been given to an AB-04 role. Never minding the obvious fallibility of this situation viz. how the role was deemed of that class and how (or who) determined the employee was of that stature, this mentality combines with other pervasive beliefs to create a storm of incompetence.

One of those other beliefs, which took root a generation ago by all appearance, is that strong managers can manage anything. Allowing for questionable applicability of "strong," the idea of managerial fungibility is overwhelming. It is a bankrupt concept proven out long ago in the private sector. It is particularly wrong and especially toxic at the practical level. That is, at the level well below "senior executive" where things are to get done. The simple truth is that it doesn't work in all but a few rare cases.

Functional skills—say in technology—is a prerequisite for success managing in that functional area. Moving people to “areas of interest” for “development” as part of a level-based promotion will not be effective. And yet, it happens... a lot. So, this is a problem.

Now let’s compound that problem by recognizing that a dominant structure for government these days, because of so much (digital) transformation and other renewal, is the project. This compounds the problem because projects have different rhythms, needs, expectations than day-to-day bureaucratic; keeping the wheels turning work. *But* since the overwhelming majority of the resource pool for employee participants has to come from the line organization, there are people unprepared to properly contribute (see above) that believe they remain in a walk-a-thon when they’ve actually joined a tournament of sprints.

That’s probably enough. But there’s more. When senior executives want to “get stuff done,” they are speaking about “delivery” or “execution.” It would be bad enough if these words were interpreted with the same urgency that external consultants bring with them. (Remember, the difference is in the nature of “the game.” The private sector and consultants see getting stuff done as a series of finite games: it finishes and we move on. The game in government is infinite: the goal is to keep the game going.) But it’s worse.

It’s worse, because “delivery” and “execution” are operational activities. Policy-minded people, which seem to comprise an understandably inordinate proportion of the population, are decidedly not operational. They are ponderers. They are examiners. They seek the universally best course of action (theoretically, of course). Good operational people will think and examine too. Only their goal is the best course of action *now*. And then they do it.

So imagine the exponentially small potential for success when the personnel charged with getting stuff done *in a foreign environment* (project) doing—or, worse,

leading—work that they may have no clear experiential work that they may understanding of, have a tempermental/behavioural propensity for *not* getting things done.

This is the transformation circumstance in most areas of government.

There are ways to change this situation. Pretending it doesn't exist or that tweaking the edges in "small-t transformation" that doesn't account for culture, behavior, rewards, etc. isn't it.

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