

Remove the Public Service to Transform the Public Service

BY

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A key feature of public service culture, as exposed elsewhere, is governance as an inferior substitute to leadership. At its heart, governance is about appropriate stewardship, which is important and has to happen everywhere. *For change, transformation, and innovation*, protecting is by definition inappropriate: a losing proposition. These are, however, the demands of circumstance for much of the public sector now.

Experience with and observation of specifically this cultural bias sustains my belief that the most likely way to successfully transform government is to remove the people from the act of transforming. That changes neither the circumstances nor the culture. But since the former cannot be avoided and must be embraced, while the latter is problematic under these conditions *but not after a return to equilibrium*, the culture has to be isolated for the time being.

Governance is, of course, only one manifestation of cultural incompatibility with the times. There are others. Collectively they suggest today's public service is in no position to transform itself. It hasn't the capacity to do so. That is an urgent problem in the circumstance.

All that said, it makes sense because people are habit driven; they seek and tend to thrive under consistency. Public sector employees are accustomed and don't want, let alone know how to cope with extended but temporary disequilibrium. Temporary is key. For the public service, the need to transform or innovate is temporary. (It may persist a decade or two, but not be permanent.) Whereas culture is long term. A culture shaped by and for equilibrium will again be valuable when it returns.

Besides, the culture has proven resilient under threat has entered a positive environment. Through decades of vigorous siege upon it, the public service hunkered down. The anticipated radical, cultural changes never came despite those threats, as existential for the civil service as any could be. The pandemic, though, helped usher in a sea change with waves of not only illness but of government expansion. This bright future for the public service is unlikely to inspire introspection never mind change.

This is typical. To the extent oil & gas businesses were ever conscious of their failings, like rampant inefficiency and ineffectiveness, it wasn't during the years of 'peak oil.' It revealed itself in the wake of negative crude prices, gluts, collapsed demand, cost effectiveness of renewables, and a world belatedly acknowledging the *truly* existential threat of climate change.

Perceived incentive for public service change is a hallucination. Change, should it come at all, will be grudging, haphazard, separated sufficiently both in place and time to dampen any developing inertia.

So, I see only two viable roads to successful transformation.

Trying harder to have the public service implement transformation will demand a return of the halcyon days of government: a few, supernaturally empowered senior

leaders who compel meaningful change. Men and women willing and able to *micromanage* for a decade or more could make transformation take root.

Sadly, the 2020s are not the 1920s, 40s, 60s, or even the 80s. In today's tribally politicized, short term government environment, finding such people, empowered for that long, is unlikely. The risk of a redirection, or worse, a reversal from the top—inevitable when political masters assert control or extreme *persuasion*—ends transformation instantly. Not only is any ground gained lost, but any developing belief or credibility in transformation is killed for at least another generation.

This disaster scenario presumes the improbable leader has overcome the formidable structural hurdles. The good news is that such a leader in such a situation would not prioritize—might not even care about changing the culture. (S)He will demand compliance long enough for behaviour and attitude to root. As personnel turnover fades, organizational memory may *inform* but probably will not determine organizational performance.

Wake up! This dream is unlikely except in the most dire (political) emergency. Best to not waste much time on it. That leaves the second option.

The second option is to design and build the transformation side-by-side with ongoing operations. When ready, the public service is emplaced within these new structures with new rules and processes, and instructions for how to apply their particular skills to govern it. This approach avoids the weakness and plays to the strength of the public service. Strength essential and valuable *after* the transformation but a liability *during*.

On its surface this could seem daunting—if not impossible—if for no other reason than the scale. It sounds a bit like rebuilding the fleet on the water. Valid perspectives. *But*, the government operations to be transformed almost always require decomposition and

rethinking anyway. Decomposing larger entities into connected and related smaller ones opens opportunity for scale-independence. Which is not to say it would be easy or inexpensive. Only, that the non-human transformation can be done *ex parte* of the people that will ultimately administer and govern it.

The enormity of the change management task—to shepherd the people through the change-fraught transformation—is not to be understated. It should, however, have a dramatically different nature than current efforts and so-called best practice. As with the dream executives described earlier, concern for people’s views, opinions, biases, and experiences—ventilating them for “buy in” would not be a factor. People not changing anything external to themselves should not need to rationalize the difference.

To be blunt, the people are treated consistent with the pervasive public sector mentalité. As fungible actors, they will be merely applying their skills and cultural strengths to a different situation. Not to diminish the skills implied, a pilot does not need to have a hand in designing the airplane to expertly fly it.

There is abundant, superficial case study and myth to claim the idea stillborn. But give it a moment; let it settle. There is a lot for the public service to like. Let’s assume (and I grant, it is a big assumption) that the substance of the transformation is not materially in question. How could this approach be “sold” to public sector employees—from the lowest to the highest? Here are but a few points for why and how the approach can resonate.

First, to everyone, incremental change seems easier but requires attention and persistence that does not burden discontinuity. Constant, sustained adjustment is psychologically harder than a harsh sudden change. Once the brief trauma is over, mind and body can focus on the present and future rather than dwell on preserving or developing the past into the current situation. At the least this limits the distraction of writing a narrative for how we got to here—good or bad.

Second, the frustrations of reprogramming and retraining, are reduced. The skills and attitudes needed for transformation in the prevailing ambiguous and changing conditions (VUCA), which are hard to develop—if they are trainable at all, are unnecessary. Instead, the strong culture and skills remain intact and effective for use in a new, receptive environment where they are needed and valuable. Not culturally reprogramming people means no costly, frustrating, and futile efforts to do so.

Third, *everyone* is heavily insulated from risk in many ways. Career risk, heightened by transformation failure, is limited to performance of required behaviours. These are the same but different: fundamentally the same but distinct from prior behaviours. The foundation is there and the propensity to backslide lower. (Re)Training can focus on required specific skills not on rationalizing the state transitions. Hopefully, this limits everyone's investment in preserving "their" way or "their" view of the future. From top to bottom, the potential for committee-driven poor solutions shaped by oversight and governance structures trying to defend with attacking is eliminated because the solution is out of their hands. Which also means politics is completely removed from the transformation: the focus is on the success of operations, increased efficiencies, and risk reducing incremental improvement.

I don't believe in and see no need to reprogram public sector administrators, even could it be done. That is guaranteed to create problems, perhaps of even greater consequence. Sequestering and limiting all public sector employees' influence on transformations until the replacement is working and all issues have been worked out, when the result is ready to be administered, governed, and incrementally (slowly, carefully) improved seems like a good alternative.

How? Time, money, and vision. That is for another day.

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