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The Four Things You Need to Know

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Abstract: The best approach to appreciating the complex issues involved in public policy is to eschew single domains of specialist knowledge and instead apply three general principles of understanding. First, by establishing links between apparently unconnected specialisms; second, by adopting a conjectural approach of trial and error; and third, by framing policy questions in terms of risk and uncertainty. Finally, for those with leadership responsibilities of public institutions, a fourth factor needs to be recognized. In organizational life, political and managerial leaders need to realize that people are principally motivated to do well intrinsically and not mainly through external incentives.

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In Sartre's novel *Nausea*, the central character, Antoine Roquentin recounts the activity of Ogier, a bailiff's clerk. Ogier has spent seven years in a library. He is able to discuss Kant but not Plato. The reason for his partial knowledge is because he is teaching himself by reading through a library of books from A to Z and after seven years he has only got to L. Ogier's approach to knowledge is linear, cumulative and serial. In my view this approach to accumulating knowledge mirrors the presumptions of many public service managers or politicians. When they take managerial or political responsibility for a new service they, quite understandably, race to understand its essence, its truths, its rhythms. They want to 'know' the issues inside out. They focus on a new letter in the alphabet – a new shelf of books.

Imagine that you have no background in, say, public transport management and planning, in the imprisoning and rehabilitation of criminal offenders or in the educational psychology of children with special needs. And yet also imagine that you have been elected or appointed to make judgements about the strategic direction of these critical services. What if you have to decide whether the budget of one should be lower at the expense of the budget of the other? What if the organization had low morale and needed improving? You would seek out those with credibility, experience and knowledge in these two areas; immerse yourself in the issues, the prevailing concepts and available evidence in each domain; identify the key problems that need tackling and search out the most trusted solutions to these problems. You would try to discover data about comparative service performance and relative service outcomes. But you would also know that, after even a few weeks of effort, your knowledge would still be thin, superficial and partial. What do you do?

In the private or third sectors this problem is partly solved for organizational leaders by established organizational economics. Put simply, these sectors are 'mission driven' – they therefore achieve success through focus and specialization. This means that those at the helm of these organizations are immersed in the services or products of that organization and its purposes. Of course very many organizations in these sectors undertake a wide range of activities, but even the most conglomerate private sector organization does not have the array of functions and responsibilities of, say, a unitary metropolitan Council. And few operate in a similar goldfish bowl of accountability to that of a major Department of State.

Those senior public managers and politicians at the helm of large multi-purpose public organizations face challenges of a different order. The scope of their responsibilities is wide because the responsibilities of their organizations is broad. One of the central problems that therefore confronts the leaders in these public institutions is how best to make judgements across areas of specialism.

The mistake they often make is the same as Roquentin's acquaintance, Ogier. This is because the prevailing mental model of knowledge is one of breadth – of ever increasing specialization through the diversification and accumulation of knowledge. However, in this short article, I shall argue that if public managers or politicians are to grasp the essence of many distinct domains what they need is depth of knowledge and not breadth of knowledge. In an attempt to sketch out this argument I shall assert that there are just four things that senior public managers and politicians need to know if they are to be successful leaders of public institutions. I accept that the simplicity of this argument masks complex undercurrents but for clarity and ease of reference I shall stick with these four things.

1. Consilience: The Links between Specialisms

For the past hundred or so years the ideal of the unity of learning appears to have been abandoned. In his inspiring text, *Consilience*, Edward O. Wilson (1998: 13) argues that, with rare exceptions, learning has 'dissolved into a slurry of minor disciplines and specialised courses'. And yet, 'most of the issues that vex humanity daily ... cannot be solved without integrating knowledge from the natural sciences with that of the social sciences and humanities'. His argument is that it is not feasible to adopt a balanced perspective if topics or disciplines are studied in pieces or fragments. Balanced perspectives require a coherence of understanding or, to use Wilson's (1998: 8) term – a consilience: literally, 'the "jumping together" of knowledge by the linking of facts and fact based theory across disciplines to create a common groundwork of explanation'. Wilson's central proposition is that rational inquiry in one domain, such as natural science or moral philosophy, informs reasoning in another (such as social science). The novelty of this proposition is evidence of the irony that during a time when advanced learning (through a proliferation of studies at universities) has flourished it has, for the most part, dissolved into thousands of unconnected fragments.

This approach, to building a unity of inquiry between the natural sciences, social sciences and moral philosophy, is extraordinarily powerful for public managers and politicians who are faced with developing coherent solutions to complex problems that straddle established academic 'disciplines'. For example, contemporary public policy that is focused on combating, say, climate change needs to link policy instruments designed to influence individual and collective behaviour (mixing social science with economics) with evidenced based science (environmental and natural science) on the issues concerned.

2. Trial and Error is the Best Approach for Solving Problems

Progress depends upon learning what works and what does not – and crucially progress only occurs when we junk approaches that do not work while persisting with those that do. Consequently, the best route to solving problems is rapid learning from trial and error. This leads to three distinct but interrelated points. First, managers arguably spend too much time fashioning new policy (honing the intent of policy and weighing up the costs and benefits of various policy instruments that might serve to realize the intent of policy). They spend less time focusing on the effectiveness of policy implementation (the execution phase of the cycle that is all too often overlooked in analysis of public sector management) and on the overall impact of policy. The lesson is that all stages of the policy cycle deserve equal attention.

Second, learning from error and mistake is difficult in organizations that are hard-wired for public accountability. Accountability is a complex six syllable word that, in the intense examination of media or political scrutiny, can shift to a single syllable word – blame. Organizations that have a culture of learning do not have a culture of blame. Learning organizations depersonalize errors and mistakes and yet enable people to learn from it in ways that make them less likely to make the same errors and mistakes in the future.

Third, in order to convince others that we know what we are doing, we need first to convince ourselves – and the first step in doing this is to prepare a plan. Plans are the essence of human activity. They are

controlled imaginings. And plans are vital in marshaling resources and attention. An audit spells out what happened, a plan spells out what is meant to happen.

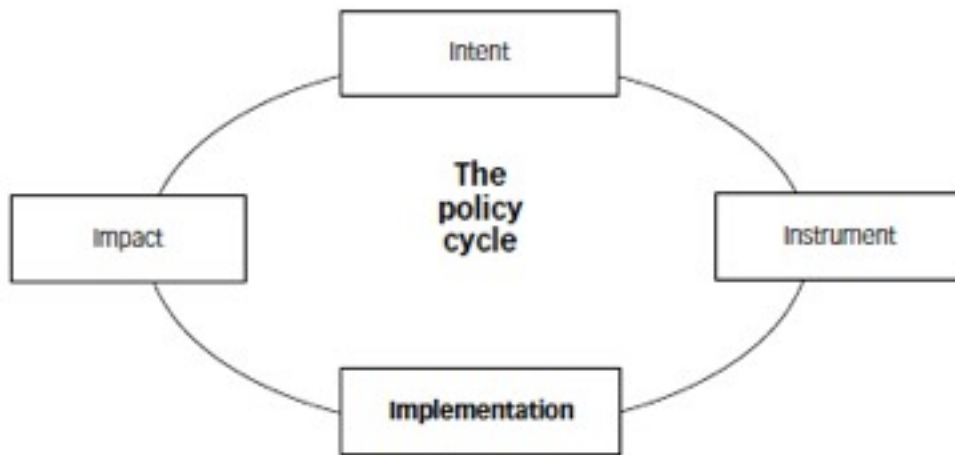


Figure 1 The policy cycle

As stewards of large organizations doing complex things, elected politicians and public managers rely heavily on the disciplines of strategic planning. They devise strategic service plans – for the design and delivery of services. They devise strategic management plans for their organizations – at both the operational and corporate levels. Moreover, they also devise overarching strategies to knit service and management plans together.

The science of planning is an important discipline in marshaling resources and focusing attention – but above all it is comforting. This is because while planning is essential it can also give an impression of control – scenarios become forecasts; forecasts become trends; trends become targets; and targets drive change. However, the limits of strategic planning are no excuse for avoiding the discipline of planning (Mintzberg, 1993). We need to plan to manage the uncertainty we face. But we need to recognize that ultimately plans will never be implemented fully. Future circumstances will always be different from that that was imagined. And emergent approaches to doing new things or doing things in new ways will always arise from entrepreneurial actors. Thus while planning is crucial and essential – it is never complete. There will always be a new error, a new mistake from which to learn and from which new plans and intentions can be devised.

3. Uncertainty, Probability and Risk Frame Everything

Public services are being designed and delivered in the context of uncertainty. Risk is all around – through external shocks, internal tremors or system failures. That is why politicians and managers need to understand how the rules of probability and chance apply in the service and organizational context in which they are operating. They need to have an appreciation of risk alongside a grasp of the principles of risk management. First, they need to have an understanding of external risks. Second, they need an appreciation of the managerial risk of a service or a project failing to achieve its intended outcomes. Third, they need a grasp of how best to achieve service and organizational resilience in the face of risk and uncertainty. Together these approaches will help them operate more confidently in their specific context of uncertainty.

Risk is usually calculated as function of the chance of its occurrence with the scale of its likely impact. However, service, financial and managerial risks are often compounded by assessments of the likely reputational risks concerned. These reputational risks are more than political – they relate to public

legitimacy, acceptance and assurance. The demand for public services are just as susceptible to small but mass changes in behaviour as is the case with private sector services. And public agencies are not simply having to redesign services to meet ever changing and uncertain demand. Many public services are themselves designed to minimize or mitigate different forms of risk.

At its broadest we all face three sets of risks. First, there are those risks that arise from who we are and how we choose to live our life (many of the goals to reduce health inequalities stem from an analysis as to what should be done to reduce these risks). Second are those risks that arise from who we live with (most violence is experienced by women and children within households at the hands of, mostly, aggressive men and fathers). Third, are those exogenous risks that arise through natural hazard; human error, failure or malicious intent – this includes everything from floods, traffic accidents to terrorism.

From this analysis it can be seen that an appreciation of uncertainty, probability and risk management can help public leaders consider the relative effectiveness and efficiency of different approaches to wholly unrelated problems. Here are just four illustrations – what to do to raise immunization levels in a population; how to reduce traffic accidents on a highway network; how to reduce the incidence of street robbery in an urban area; and how to mitigate flooding risks in rural lowlands?

4. Intrinsic Motivation Counts for More than External Incentives

People elected or appointed to public leadership positions find that they have responsibility for harnessing the energies of many thousands of other people (whether they are directly employed or engaged indirectly through service contracts). The question they face is how best to go about achieving this goal?

The role of leadership of public organizations often sounds passive and neutral. This is because leaders are expected to produce an appropriate but simple organizational vision: which is then expected to be clothed in 'mission statements', vision and value statements, corporate goals, plans and targets – alongside an accompanying panoply of organizational culture and development tools. The purpose of these managerial approaches is to 'align' people's behaviour to the organization's goals and strategies.

What's more the language of public sector management is heavy with the economists approach to 'incentives'. Usually the discussion in public policy is about how central government can incentivise proper behaviour of other public institutions that are part of some wider 'public service delivery chain'. And this language infects discussion about how senior public leaders should themselves operate and how they can best incentivise others. This produces an emphasis on how best to devise a system of extrinsic motivators: the language of 'carrots and sticks' (indeed, I once heard of a discussion about carrot shaped sticks). This is not an entirely unreasonable proposition. External incentives that encourage knightly behaviour and corresponding disincentives to discourage knavish behaviour are entirely sound and acceptable (Le Grand, 2003). It is the lack of emphasis on intrinsic motivators that is notable.

Of course, external factors bear down on people's motivation. But most people are heavily self-motivated. There are three basic sources of personal motivation that people need at work. First, everyone needs to have a sense of personal accomplishment in the tasks and activities they have performed. They may get this sense from their own assessment of a job well done or they may get this sense from feedback from their co-workers or their manager. Second, everyone wants to establish a connection with other people while they are pursuing their tasks and activities – working alone is limiting however rewarding its outcomes. After all, team working is rewarding in itself. And third, everyone wants to feel some sense of involvement in progress – a sense that through combined efforts with others, things are being made better (Thomas, 2000).

It is undoubtedly the case that cooperative endeavour between people within organizations (both public and private) is a driving force in wider economic progress. But to what extent do people cooperate

together for best effect naturally and to what extent do they require leadership and management to coordinate their efforts? The late management theorist Sumantra Ghoshal, argued that organizations are, 'versatile and creative, they are a prodigious amplifier of human effort' (Ghoshal and Moran, 2005: 1). The precise contribution of effective leadership and management to achieving this amplification may be contested but, aside from anarchists, no one argues that it has no effect.

The role of organizational leadership is conventionally described as being focused on setting strategy, structure and systems. Sumantra Ghoshal's case is that leadership in large organizations requires a new doctrine – focused around purpose, process and people. Elected and appointed public leaders, through their passions and their conduct, create a climate in their organizations. Positive organizational climates energize and motivate people; positive climates encourage people to offer their discretionary effort to engage with each other in ever closer teamwork for high impact. By contrast, negative organizational climates sap people's energy and dissipate their enthusiasm; people withdraw their discretionary effort and adopt a principle of least effort for low impact.

Summary

Effective leadership is required in public sector organizations to solve complex problems as well as to deliver high quality services. The array of problems to be tackled is vast and the range of services to be delivered is broad – but that is what makes the leadership roles on offer so exciting and challenging. The 'golden fleece' of public service management is better coordination – between problems to be solved and services to be delivered. This is why the 'holistic' or 'joined-up' government agenda has been evident in public policy for the past decade.

The natural tendency for people charged with the task of leadership (whether elected or appointed) is, quite understandably, to 'do the detail'. This short article has sought to demonstrate a simpler and quicker route. It has argued that the most powerful approach to knowledge is deep not broad (1), and that there is a unity to learning. It has argued that learning is genuine when it involves trial and error; that pervasive uncertainty requires a grasp of probability and risk management; and that the people in organizations are intrinsically motivated to perform well and that they require effective leadership and management to do their best.

Note

1. The idea for this article, that knowledge is best grasped in depth and not breadth, stems from a scintillating book by Deutsch (1997).

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