

The Seven Scourges of Modern Public Management

I try to focus on the positive. For instance, I hold the entirely unpopular view that we have good public administration in Canada. I also think that public administration has proven itself time and again in terms of rising to the occasion in emergencies, but also in doing the heavy lifting of policy development and sound implementation. There is lots of evidence of this.

That being said, such support (for what it is worth) means that I also get well and truly worked up about some trends within public management generally that get in the way of this work. Some of it is imposed by the political realities of public administration. And just as much is self-imposed. Here are a few of things that I see that get in the way of good public management.

Institutional Spaghetti: This is when we hear more about a unit or division or ministry than we hear about the problem to be solved. This is when segmentation of a problem – and what big problem today is not segmented – ensures that nothing will be done. This is when everyone is accountable so no one is.

Bloated Policy: Not every problem needs a new policy to fix it. Sometimes, it just needs to be fixed. Sometimes mistakes happens. Sometimes our perfectly crafted policy hits the real world and has to accommodate.

Short-Term Memory Loss: This occurs when organizations fail to learn from their mistakes, forget what they have done in the past to solve a problem and how that worked and declare new strategies that look like old strategies to fix something that did not work, but they forgot that.

Fear-Driven Paralysis: This is a big ugly one. Christopher Pollitt has called this the blame game: plan your response to avert blame, not fix the problem. This is when you hear phrases like risk aversion and zero risk, both two very dangerous concepts. This is also another way to lead to control lasagna.

Organizational Guerilla Warfare: This is hardly new. But today it is reaching dangerous proportions where we see not just good old-fashioned turf protection, but systems that do not interact very well or not at all. Or, where knowledge is not shared to solve a problem. You might call this one targeted interoperability.

Shrinking Scope for Action and Risk-Taking: This is really a form of paralysis by analysis, or strangulation by interdependence. This is where inaction feels like the easiest form of action, even if there are real costs to the public. It is also where error or off-target results are seen as unnatural events. Finally, this is where we see pre and post auditing or review that second guesses the actual work being done.

Empty Words: More and more governments are putting out big ideas like security, public safety, and on and on, that imply they are in control of what is happening. For

the most part, they are running on hope and aspiration. Good public administration is not a communications exercise.

What are a few antidotes to these scourges? This is tough stuff once you have been addicted to them:

- Simplify and put your words, organization and sense-making to the “Can I explain this to my mom?” test.
- Modesty and understatement beat our declarative self-congratulation.
- Celebrate and use expertise, even when you don’t like what they are saying.
- Understand the key processes you are responsible for before jumping to dumb conclusions about what went wrong, what are the risks and what more controls you need.
- Never look at a policy change or proposal that has not passed the sniff test from those who actually have to carry it out or those what are going to “benefit” from it.
- Understand and embrace risk as a powerful tool.
- Reflect before you react: what is really going on? Shut up and listen. Take five breaths before you talk.

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