



Reality Bites: Picking up the Clerk's Collaboration Challenge

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“If there is any term I could use to define new leaders, it would be “collaborative” because it’s a question now of getting outside our comfort zone and discussing issues with provincial governments, the private sector, volunteer sectors and civil society.”¹

“We’re no longer the keepers of all the knowledge”². It “is also about engaging more deeply with those beyond the boundaries of the Public Service”³ “Collaboration is about pooling our collective energy”.⁴ “To deal with the complexities of today’s world, we need to work with each other, and we all need to collaborate with citizens, the private sector, academia and civil society to resolve the problems and challenges we face.”⁵ “Today, governments are no longer seen by Canadians as the solution to all their problems. We are now seen as a “partner”⁶

“Public servants can still make a difference, but it means that we have to be able to adapt, develop partnerships, be creative, find more efficient ways for programs and services to be delivered and develop consensus with a wide variety of stakeholders on what’s the best approach ... Collaboration, consultation, partnerships - these need to be the hallmarks of the Public Service of Canada in the future.”⁷

- Wayne Wouters, Clerk of the Privy Council of Canada

There can be no doubt that the head of Canada’s Federal Public Service believes that the organization must adapt to the changing realities of more distributed knowledge, resources and power by becoming more collaborative. Rarely now can the government, on its own, successfully address issues on behalf of Canadians. But saying we should be collaborative and *being* collaborative are two entirely different things, especially given the legacy of hierarchy, control, fear, and leadership that so prevail in the Public Service. The required shift amounts to ending the hegemony of the paternalistic, Hegelian ‘State’, whose adherents religiously believe the “State knows best” and has a special claim to divining society’s ‘shared values’. In its stead a

¹ WOUTERS, Wayne. In conversation with Toby Fife, *Canadian Government Executive*, Nov. 2011.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ WOUTERS, Wayne. Speech to The National Managers’ Community Forum, Winnipeg, MN, 8 May 2012.

⁵ WOUTERS, Wayne. Speech to the Institute of Public Administration of Canada, Victoria, BC, 29 August 2011.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

self-organizing system⁸ of coordination must emerge where it is recognized that (a) nobody is fully able to ‘take charge’, and (b) there are no shared values agreed to by all stakeholders⁹.

The old *Big ‘G’ Government* approach to decision making (hierarchical, centralized, authoritarian, coercive) is giving way to a *small ‘g’ governance* (more pluralist, participative, horizontal, experimentalist), one that is better equipped to cope with the challenge of polycentric coordination, and more capable of reconciling a variety of interests and belief systems in the process of developing concerted action. Yet unlike *Big “G” Government*, *small ‘g’ governance* regimes are dominated by the dynamics of cooperation and social learning.¹⁰

This has many implications for an organization as large and steeped in tradition as the Public Service of Canada. The first of which is that there is no generalized organizational understanding of what collaboration is or how to affect it. What is not yet appreciated is that our old notions of management, administration and leadership were developed for an environment that is merely a subset of the world in which we live -- one dominated by change, uncertainty, the coexistence of opposite logics and by people who are unique, contradictory and unpredictable. While collaboration and co-governance are mechanisms for adapting to this larger reality, the Public Service has little to no institutional understanding of collaboration theory or the basic tools, skills and affordances to affect collaboration in practice. Hence, collaboration is frequently seen as an act of desperation, “an un-natural act between non-consenting adults”.¹¹

On the other hand, collaboration is not too hard nor too difficult. It’s just that we don’t understand how to do it, so we don’t do it well. Mostly we indulge in fantasies. We believe that collaboration will come forth automatically, without clearly explaining why, or what mechanisms might be used to catalyze, reify, or sustain it. We engage in collaboration believing that we don’t have to change; that as partners we can be first among many; that we can compel people to voluntarily collaborate; that effective collaboration means eliminating conflict; that failure won’t happen; and that contracts will save us. As Jocelyn Elders, the former US Surgeon General, once identified “we all say we want to collaborate, but what we really mean is that we want to continue doing things as we have always done them while others change to fit what we are doing.”¹² Such thinking reflects a significant degree of cognitive dissonance that occurs as we attempt to shoehorn our collaborative behaviour into a management paradigm that is not only inappropriate but often counterproductive.

For instance, management and public administration are obsessed with leadership, but when no one is, or can be, ‘in charge’, *too much leadership is usually the problem*. Here I don’t necessarily mean individual leaders but the very concept of leadership itself. Think of the attributes usually associated with good leaders – their confidence in their own judgment, their ‘take charge’ attitude, their willingness to whip people into line, their dominance – but these prized attributes almost guarantee collaboration fails. What’s needed in collaboration is not leadership but stewardship; and not a personality-based stewardship but process-based

⁸ OSTROM, Elinor, et al. “Covenants with and without a Sword: Self-governance is possible,” *The American Political Science Review*, 86(2), 1992: 404-417.

⁹ PAQUET, G. and C. Wilson. “Collaborative co-governance as inquiring systems”, *Optimum Online*, vol. 41(2), June 2011.

¹⁰ PAQUET, G. *Governance Through Social Learning*, The University of Ottawa Press, Ottawa, 1999.

¹¹ BACKER, Thomas. *Evaluating Community Collaborations*, Springer Publishing, New York, NY, 2003: 10.

¹² Ibid: 10.

stewardship, what my colleagues and I at the Centre on Governance refer to as an “inquiring system”¹³.

The cultural change in the Public Service implied by the need to become more collaborative should not be underestimated. It is huge. But it will not be achieved by leaders imposing a new system top down. That’s part of the old model that’s being supplanted. It will be achieved largely through the grass roots efforts of public servants taking ownership of situations where they can and where they believe they can serve Canadians better. Shared ownership is therefore key, as is a willingness to ‘scheme virtuously’¹⁴, experiment, and share one’s experience.

The first step in solving a problem is in identifying it -- and that the Clerk has done. Plus he has given clear cover for all those who would like to experiment with collaboration, even as he has lent legitimacy to GCpedia as a mechanism to share those experiences widely across the Public Service. The next steps then depend on Public Servants themselves.

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¹³ HUBBARD, R., G. Paquet and C. Wilson, *Stewardship: Collaborative Metagovernance and Inquiring Systems*, Invenire Books, Ottawa, 2012

¹⁴ PAQUET, G. *Scheming Virtuously: The road to collaborative governance*, Invenire Books, Ottawa, 2009