Local Government Reform and Organizational Change

Symposium Editor
James D. Ward
Mississippi University for Women

Exploring local government reform and organizational change has been a constant in American public administration research since the genesis of the discipline, beginning with the early notions of maximizing organizational performance through top-down hierarchies, value-free administration and universal principles. Such notions culminated in preferences for the council-manager system of government, as embodied by the Good Government Reform movement of the 1920s and 1930s. (Denhardt, 2000; Wilson, 1997 [1887])

Today's scholars approach organizational change and local government reform through much wider lens. As noted by the articles in this symposium, organizational change requires the application of both behavioral and structural transformations if effective change is to be achieved. In other words, the roles of political and administrative leadership, individual and group motivation, and the public's perception of the effectiveness of public officials and governmental structures are keys to success in planned and transformative change.

Some scholars have emphasized competing theoretical perspectives to organization change. The organizational behavior perspective defines success in terms of an ongoing "process state" rather than traditional outcomes based assessments tied to increased market expansion and qualitative or quantitative outputs, which are associated with, and often more easily ascertained, when gauging private sector change. Similarly, adherents to Organization Development (OD), a highly popular approach in the 1970s and 1980s, utilize behavioral science techniques and change agents with specified goals in mind for the achievement of behavioral and/or structural improvement. OD incorporates a planned and organization-wide change that is also process driven. (Ott, 1996; Gortner, 1987)

Other scholars (Fernandez and Rainey, 2006) have asked the question of whether government organizations can indeed change. These scholars have identified points of consensus regarding initiatives for large-scale, planned, strategic and administrative change, and outlined eight factors and propositions to influence change outcomes. Such is not offered as a "road map but as a compass for practitioners seeking to find their way amid" the daunting challenges they confront daily when attempting planned, strategic and administrative change on a large-scale.

According to other research (see Ashworth, Boyne and Delbridge, 2009), the trend towards organization change – whether dealing with cities adopting administrative and organizational structures that approximate hybrid models, organizations adhering to behavioral and process oriented techniques such as OD, or organizations embracing market based performance orientations such as with New Public Management (NPM) – may all be better explained by the postulation that organizations pursue legitimacy by conforming to isomorphic pressures in their environment through compliance or convergence. In other words, change may be pursued not because of any underlying organizational failure but because of the perceived need to exhibit an embracement of, if not acquiescence to, the prevailing administrative ethos. In this sense, convergence and compliance are seen as definitions of conformity based in institutional theory, rather than a merging of, for example, traditional governing models such as council-manager and mayor-council systems. Although perceived pressure to conform has been found to be stronger in regards to strategies and culture, the perceived need of cities to adopt hybrid models or market based performance orientations may be explained by institutional theory, as well.

The call for public sector organizations to embrace private sector management techniques, market oriented philosophies, and a devolution of bureaucratic structures as preferred methods for increasing levels of efficiency and effectiveness, reached a high water mark in the 1980s and 1990s with New Public Management (NPM). However, by the early 2000s, NPM had found itself being reconciled with, if not superseded by, the realization of a greater need to better orient change to technology-centered reform offered through the capacities of e-government, and the specific government structures, culture, social effects and expectations of public sector organizations. (Dunleavy, et. al., 2006; Pollitt and Bouchaert, 2011; Lane, 2000; Osborne and Gaebler, 1992; Lynn, 2005; Ewalt, 2001).

Other observers, recognizing a perceived need for fundamental change, have asked if change is more difficult to achieve in government organizations because of the basic characteristics that distinguish government organizations from their private sector counterparts, regardless of the change perspective subscribed to. Although these observers (Robertson and Seneviratne, 1995) found that implementing change in public sector organization work settings is more difficult, such does not prevent improved organizational performance. In addition, it was noted that OD techniques were just as effective in both the public and private sectors.

Do basic characteristics of public sector organizations present obstacles to successful planned and transformative change? In my study of the transformation of Cincinnati city government from a council-manager to a hybrid model (see Ward, 2009), it was discovered that citizen expectations, as well as perceptions of the leadership at City Hall, were key variables that must be heavily weighed if a successful change or transformation process is to be achieved. Hence, a wider range of stakeholders, a commitment to the democratic principles of responsive and representative government, and the often lack of traditional market forces such as competition for services, are some of the basic characteristics that make planned and transformative change in the public sector more daunting. Yet, such reform efforts, if nothing else, highlight the challenges facing many local governments and public sector organizations as they respond to the need for structural and behavioral change

brought on by a plethora of environmental demands from stakeholders such as citizens groups, business development interests, and others. (also see Svara, 2009, Frederickson, et. al, 2004).

Articles Synopsis

This symposium presents four contributions to the study of local government reform and organizational change. David Hamilton, in "Does Regionalism Detract from Local Democracy? The Impact of Government Scale on Participation," lays out the arguments of those who oppose metropolitan consolidation as a viable solution to metropolitan fragmentation. Opponents of this approach to metropolitan reform contend that centralization reduces citizen accountability and control and thus lowers participation, access, and the vibrancy of democracy in local governments. Considering levels of participation as one proxy for local government democracy, Hamilton shows "that centralization does not reduce already anemic levels of participation" and argues that while centralized governments may be less efficient, the larger bureaucracy tends to be less politicized and services tend to be more evenly provided.

Etienne Charbonneau and Gautam Nayer, in "Barriers to the Use of Benchmarking Information: Narratives from Local Government Managers," address the problem of underutilization of performance information in public organizations. They identify barriers to the uses of performance information by local government managers that could be an impediment to effective organizational change and improved performance. Charbonneau and Nayer use content analysis to assess local government reform in Canada and in the United States and present research from 390 electronic surveys of local managers in the province of Quebec, Canada. With the stated goal of examining and analyzing the difficulties expressed by local managers during the implementation of required performance measurement initiatives, Charbonneau and Nayer conclude that local managers in the study most often do not take advantage of performance benchmarking information due to issues related to their willingness to use it, rather than their inability or the idea that they are prevented from using it.

Thomas Longoria and Lynne Manganaro, in "Citizen Approval of CAOs in Texas Cities: An Explanatory Analysis of Anglo and Latino Attitudes," find that the variables *trust in local government* and *income* are statistically significant predictors of citizen approval of chief administrative officers (CAOs). The authors utilize a statewide survey of Texas voters to examine the job approval ratings of CAOs in Texas. The authors limit their study to Anglo and Latino CAOs, and oversample the Latino population to ensure a sufficient number of Latino-led jurisdictions are included in the sample. The article looks at whether, and to what extent, the approval ratings of Anglo and Latino CAOs are a function of co-ethnic representation, institutional structure, trust, local economic and social conditions, and local population dynamics. As a result of their study, Longoria and Manganaro argue that chief administrative officers should push to promote trust in government if they wish to increase approval ratings among the groups surveyed. In essence, higher approval ratings are commensurate with the public's confidence in public officials and governing structures.

April Moreno, in "Health Care Reform and the Medicaid Expansion: Implications on County Substance Abuse Programs and Ethnically/Racially Diverse Populations," contends that the new federal health care legislation will bring unprecedented changes in the substance use disorder (SUD) field, affecting all aspects of health care, including SUD treatment services funding. This contribution to the symposium addresses the question of how continued and equitable access to services, including SUD services under the new health care reform, may be sustained in local social service agencies. The author outlines how local substance use disorder (SUD) treatment agencies and providers at the county level should prepare for the changes in order to meet the needs of the expanded and newly eligible Medicaid population. She argues that such will be the key to providing SUD services for effective outcomes to diverse populations.

About the Contributors

David K. Hamilton serves as professor and Director of the Center for Public Service in the Department of Political Science at Texas Tech University. He is co-editor of *Regional Policies for Metropolitan Livability*, M.E. Sharpe, 2008 and author of *Governing Metropolitan Areas: Responses to Growth and Change*, Garland Publishing, 1999.

Etienne Chrabonneau serves as assistant professor of public management at Ecole nationale d'administration publique in Montreal, Québec. His research focus is on the comparative study of municipal performance. He has co-authored articles in *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, *American Review of Public Administration*, *Public Performance and Management Review*, *State and Local Government Review*, and *Public Administration*. **Gautam Nayer** is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at Texas Southern University. His research focus is on urban and neighborhood development issues as well as prisoner reentry programs.

Thomas Longoria is associate professor of political science at Texas State University. He is co-author of *Electoral Structures and Urban Policy: The Impact on Mexican-American Communities*, M.E. Sharpe, 1994. He has also authored numerous journal publications on immigration and election studies. **Lynne Manganaro** is assistant professor of public administration at Texas A&M University International. She is the co-author of journal publications in *Women and Justice and Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*.

April Moreno is a research analyst with the County of Los Angeles and a former Case Enforcement Officer. She is currently working with substance use disorder (SUD) programs in Los Angeles County. Her MPA degree is in public sector management and leadership from California State University at Northridge.

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