

TIME FOR A NEW, NETWORKED PUBLIC SERVICE

Patrice Dutil and Tim Reid

As Canada's federal public service gets ready to retire more than a third of its essential knowledge workers, it will simultaneously engage in a heated competition to attract creative talent. This transformation presents a window of opportunity to change rules and conventions, to find new ways of involving talent from outside, and to help those younger people already in the public sector who have patiently waited to see major changes. To enable this process, government must throw open the doors. It needs to recognize and encourage those public servants who champion a government that will work actively with other governments, communities, associations, and NGOs to protect and promote the public good.

La fonction publique fédérale mettra bientôt à la retraite plus du tiers de ses travailleurs du savoir et s'engagera simultanément dans une course serrée au recrutement de talents créateurs. Cette transition constitue une occasion propice à la révision des règles et conventions, à la recherche de nouveaux moyens pour intéresser les jeunes à la fonction publique, et à la reconnaissance des jeunes fonctionnaires ayant patiemment attendu l'arrivée d'importants changements. Pour faciliter ce processus, l'État doit ouvrir grand ses portes et appuyer sans réserve ceux de ses fonctionnaires qui sauront collaborer activement avec l'ensemble des gouvernements, des collectivités, des associations et des ONG à la protection et à la promotion du bien public.

There is an interesting irony in the recent decisions of a number of governments to prevent public servants from accessing Facebook. This website is dedicated to creating networks — precisely what public servants should be doing. Facebook and networks like it are the future — the politicians use it — and the challenge lies in using them properly, not in denying access.

The Facebook issue gives a clue as to what ails our public service right now. It involves nannying politicians, old-mentality bureaucrats who don't understand the potential of new technologies and the needs of transparency, and the urgent obligation to vastly improve the government's ability to network.

The average age of Canada's federal public service is nudging toward 50, and its senior management is even older. Over the next five years, anywhere between 30 and 40 percent of the essential knowledge workers in our public service will retire. This turnover will not happen in isolation: the change will affect the private sector as well, making the competition to attract creative talent to government all the more difficult.

Still, this transformation presents a window of opportunity to change rules and conventions, to find new ways of involving talent from outside and to help those younger

people already in the public sector who have patiently waited to see major changes. To enable this process, government must throw open the doors. It needs to recognize and encourage those public servants who will champion a government that will work actively with other governments, communities, associations and NGOs to protect and promote the public good.

This turnover in personnel is happening at the same time as a revolution in communications technology that greatly facilitates precisely this kind of collaborative work. Such a combination of new people and new technology creates a unique opportunity to transform the federal public service. But it can happen only if the right kind of people are hired and given a leadership role in the public service.

What kind of people should they be? In their book *Governing by Network: The New Shape of the Public Sector*, Stephen Goldsmith and William Eggers challenge the old definition of "public employee." "Managing in a networked environment demands an entirely different set of competencies and capabilities," they write:

In addition to planning, budgeting, staffing and other traditional government duties, it requires proficiency in a host of other tasks, such as activating, arranging, stabi-

lizing, integrating, and managing a network. To do this, network managers must possess at least some degree of aptitude in negotiation, mediation, risk analysis, trust building, collaboration and management. They must have the ability and the inclination to work across sector boundaries and the resourcefulness to overcome all the prickly challenges to governing by network.

There is a deep chasm between the reality of today and the necessary reality of the future for “government by collaborative networks.” A number of objectives must be met to create a

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government that responds to and takes advantage of the new opportunities and challenges of the 21st century. In *Canada’s Public Service in the 21st Century: Discussion Paper* (April 2007), the Public Policy Forum went even further. It painted a portrait of what the role of government should be in the 21st century and pointed out that “in some instances, departments and agencies may have to *create* external partners or offer core funding to ensure non-government organizations are equipped to undertake their responsibilities” (emphasis ours).

A key barrier affecting the state of the public service today is politicians and especially the low level of “risk tolerance” on the part of the prime minister, cabinet and the government caucus. To meet the issues of the 21st century, the public service needs to be imaginative and innovative in its policy advice and, equally important, in its implementation of programs. There is frequently a trade-off between the level of “risk” and the level of

“results”: the lower the risk tolerance, the lower the degree of innovation, and the less the potential “reward” in terms of positive results.

Politicians must begin by redefining their expectations of bureaucracy. There must be a clear message from the prime minister, cabinet ministers and deputy ministers that they will be open to advice that brings with it potential risk in exchange for potentially better results. In practice, this means treating public servants at all levels with the respect they deserve. It means asking intelligent questions in committees, not just “gotcha” queries. It means consulting with and most of all trusting public servants. It means assuming

that they are guided by professional inclinations and ethics. It means recognizing that the public service does have a legitimate role to play in dealing meaningfully with the public, and that increased contact with citizens by public servants does not detract from the legitimacy of elected representatives.

Such a redefinition does not mean that the public service gets a free pass — far from it. Indeed, with a higher level of candour and a genuinely adult conversation, information will flow and the public sector can be held to the highest standards of accountability. The best place to start is with the approach to the sometimes critical reports of the auditor general. They should not be held up as examples of managerial incompetence, but should instead be seen as exceptions that (almost inevitably) point to a harsh reality: that political objectives do not match budgets allocated to the bureaucracies, or that the political executive has simply failed in communicating its priorities and in getting out of the way of their implementation.

The current government’s *Accountability Act*, with its focus on endless definitions of “audit, audit, audit,” produces a “risk aversion” message to the public service precisely when imagination and innovation should be encouraged. Fear of failure is the enemy of innovation and of superior results.

Rather than the traditional “gotcha” approach, politicians should focus on how to help public servants work with each other to better design and execute policy. What is required is a strategy that has at its core building the capacity and the will to manage in the new networked environment, to foster and manage collaborative operational models and administrative processes. It is a strategy of purposefully moulding a public service that possesses the values and the desire to seize the opportunities provided by the rapid expansion of knowledge, of communication technology and of a

collaborative culture in order to generate more effective and transparent policy development and more effective delivery of programs to Canadians. It is a strategy that embraces the need to bring about systemic change in order to meet the challenges for Canada of the 21st century.

Change has to start at the top, at the deputy minister level. The way in which deputy ministers are assessed has to change. A new task force on public service leadership needs to be formed, with a mandate to reshape the senior ranks to ensure that they possess the range of experience and abilities that are necessary for a new networked, collaborative public service. In order to achieve this goal, the task force itself would have to reflect these new ideals. It would have to include representatives from both inside and outside the public service, representing a diverse range of skills, backgrounds and positions.

The task force would first focus on the deputy minister level, assessing

how each individual's competencies, personal attributes, temperament and personality align with the traits needed in the new public service, as noted above: trust building, mediation, team building, interpersonal skills and a record of managing networks of complex interdependent relationships with a host of third-party partners. Their attitude toward taking risks and their performance as innovators — challenging the status quo — would be central as well. The assessments would include the standard "360-degree" process with a sharpened focus on personal and professional ethics and behaviour.

It is most unlikely that the "legacy" deputy ministers would, collectively, have the full range of values, competencies and experiences required to develop the desired new human resources strategy for the public service and to provide oversight during its implementation. For example, most would have progressed through the public service by managing "the process of decision-making," leaving a deficiency within the deputy minister ranks in general, and the Committee of Senior Officials (COSO) in particular, of hard experience in actual program implementation, or of working "in the field" across Canada with businesses, other governments and NGOs.

The results of this external assessment of the "legacy" group of 35 senior executives could lead to substantial change among the individuals selected by the clerk of the Privy Council to serve as members of COSO. As well, some deputy ministers would likely retire during this phase, leaving an opportunity to round out the senior management group with new members who possess the desired new characteristics. This selection would be done by the task force itself, which would seek out relevant candidates from among the next layer of senior executives.

The second phase would be to expand this approach to an assessment of the assistant deputy ministers in charge of departmental human resources/personnel throughout the government.

In the third phase, the task force would evolve into a permanent nominating committee for senior executives, similar to a committee of the board of directors of a large publicly traded corpo-

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ration. While the committee's personnel would change over time, the breadth of its membership — both insiders and outsiders, and with varying backgrounds and experiences — would be formalized. Its mandate would be to build a collectivity of female and male DMs across the entire government with a "full range of views, experiences, perspectives, formal expertise, diversity and personality traits."

The list could include candidates with proven networking skills, a deep

understanding of the history and culture of Canada, and backgrounds in a variety of fields including financial management, law, human resources, science, economics, technology, marketing, project management and program delivery. It would also reflect the changing face of Canada. With such a "board," collective discussions would be far-ranging, imaginative and innovative, incorporating a wide variety of perspectives. Proposals to the government would reflect this diversity, providing a full range of perspectives regarding opportunities and risks.

Deputy ministers would be told that their own performance appraisals by COSO would give equal weight both to their results in implementing the new human resources strategy and to their financial management performance. (We hold that a deputy should spend at least half his time on human resources matters.) They would also be assessed on their success or failure in promoting and building collaborative horizontal arrangements for formulating policy and program advice to the government. The result would be a transformational shift from "talking the talk" to "walking the talk."

These methods of assessment and selection of deputy ministers and the senior professional human resources executives, in departments and in the Public Service Commission, would mean that their assessments of middle managers are also aligned to the new strategy. The same would be true for administrative and front-line personnel.

This process is a necessary means of supporting the many current public servants who want to be empowered and creative in imagining new possibilities for policy issues, in solving problems and in delivering programs. It is also necessary to enable the recruitment of new public servants

who will reinforce the move toward these new goals.

A significant issue for the current public service is the clash between a system that currently operates on the traditional departmental “top-down authority” model and one that operates along “horizontal lines of action.” There is an emerging consensus that the former, an ingrained and perversely rewarded silo culture, is a major barrier to addressing the dynamic policy and program issues that increasingly transcend the vertical solitudes of departmental boundaries and, indeed, of government boundaries. The question is how to make the transformation.

The most important transformation has to take place in the culture of the bureaucracy. The public service must accelerate its shift to a horizontal and collaborative model. As well, there needs to be a shift toward collaboration between governments, from the federal government to the provincial and territorial governments, the First Nations and municipalities, to address current issues in their full complexity.

What is needed to deal with such issues, which increasingly cut across the government’s departmental silos and reach outside to other governments and outside groups, is a human resources strategy and implementation plan for the public service that is purposefully aligned to understanding and to dealing effectively with them.

It is the front-line public servants outside Ottawa who have been the innovators, especially in collaborating with provincial and municipal governments and agencies in the joint planning and implementation of services. They must be more present in dealing with the many groups, associations and networks that are gestating ideas for better governance.

There is no doubt that executives in the public service were often visible among these groups before. Our point is that more public servants should be allowed to make connections and contribute to idea networks. Their work would be more rewarding and policy would invariably be strengthened by con-



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Where Ottawa meets — pedestrians on the Sparks Street Mall. As many public servants take retirement, the federal government will have to replace them by attracting “new, creative talent,” write Patrice Dutil and Tim Reid. They see this as an opportunity for reinventing government with a new, networked public service.

sistent, low- to mid-level liaisons. The likelihood of better information would probably have saved taxpayers many dollars on failed and expensive policies such as the gun registration fiasco and the recent income trust boondoggle.

Public servants working outside Ottawa regard “the centre” as impossibly far away because suggestions or changes that come from “the regions” are heavily

discounted. Time restrictions and budget limitations are the traditional excuses for keeping Ottawa public servants isolated in the capital. Meetings in Ottawa with well-informed advocacy and lobby groups are accorded more value than the input of front-line public servants who know their communities and are acutely aware of what works and what does not work in terms of actual results.

Furthermore, while public servants are at times exhorted to work collaboratively, they quickly realize that their performance appraisals by their superiors in Ottawa do not value collaborative efforts.

In reality, effective public servants already nurture good networks. But why not imagine an example of potential (non-silo) collaboration, for example the Department of the Environment working on the issue of a sustainable economy in general and of global warming in particular. This issue transcends the vertical departmental boundaries of the government as well

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as transcending the federal government itself. Currently, various departments compete among themselves not only for "territory" and budgets, but also for relationships with outside groups. Instead, skillfully designed and implemented strategies, including communication technologies, could assist the department in fostering a network that connects a host of involved third parties: other federal government departments such as Industry and Agriculture, provincial governments, international government organizations, parliamentary committees and national and international NGOs.

The deputy minister, senior managers and the department's scientists would have their respective counterparts in this web of relationships, and the detailed processes involved in planning and implementation would overlap. The question is, What is required for these relationships and management processes to be forged into an effective collaborative working relationship?

Revolutionary communications technology is a reinforcing ally or "driver" in constructively shifting to a

public service that is built along horizontal lines of action, and in the management of broader and deeper collaborations involving a variety of relevant organizations and people. It has a tremendous potential for efficiency and accountability improvements.

But the transformation will also require public servants with the values, attitudes, personalities, competencies and incentives to forge effective collaborative working relationships. It is one thing to have the communications technology to help create more effective "people networks" for policy and program devel-

opment and implementation. It is quite another matter to have people who want to use this technology as a tool for effective collaboration and who have the skill to do so.

Here again the question revolves around a human resources strategy relating to recruitment, incentives and promotions that will move toward a horizontal and much broader collaborative model. *What skills, competencies, experience, personal attributes and personality traits are required to implement such a fundamental shift?* And will these attributes be fully recognized at "performance appraisal time"? Will they be comprehended by narrowly focused financial auditors?

Doing things right requires a fundamental change in the way government works. New people have to be recruited who possess different skills, and a different kind of training will be required for many existing public servants. The focus of accountability should be as much on actual results as it is on *ex post facto* "follow the money" auditing to assess financial probity.

While good governance demands financial auditing of management, to govern effectively we must also be willing to take the risks involved in innovation and reach out to "network collaboratively" with others inside the federal government, with other governments inside and outside Canada and with NGOs, business and others in order to meet the increasingly interwoven issues of the 21st century. For this we need the right kind of people in the professional public service of Canada.

The history of our country shows that roughly every 50 years the public service has been overhauled and retooled. This is a natural cycle, and it is time for it to happen again.

Canada started with a rudimentary public administration in 1867 that depended on patronage and required little more than the expertise brought to it by politicians. Fifty years later, it was overhauled and substantially depoliticized. As Canada celebrated its centenary, the public service was professionalized even more and grew spectacularly to deliver everything from postal services to cultural policy. Now, another 50 years later, government faces two revolutions: an unprecedented scale of management exodus and a momentous communications/information revolution. Society, the political class and the bureaucracy itself must embrace the change and seize the opportunity not just to tinker with the current system, but to transform it. The public service has served Canadians well over the past 150 years. It must change in order to help our nation continue to thrive and prosper.

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