Managing in a Time of Change:

the Innovation Process

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ABSTRACT

A senior executive's final assignment while on notice of lay-off had been to lead a mammoth strategic planning exercise for the department. He expected to be found a spot for his magnificent effort, and broke into tears as he said good-bye instead, at the event announcing the new strategy.

Those who remained experienced guilt, fear, anger, depression and anxiety, all grounded in a core sense of violation. They felt that they were staying alive by cannibalizing their fellow travellers, that they were in charge of life rafts and had to decide who could stay and who had to be thrown overboard, that they were soldiers parachuted into hostile territory and abandoned while their generals took early retirement and forgot about them (Noer, 1993, pp. 36-37).

These are the experiences of the managers in charge of downsizing and the workers who survive it. They are the symptoms and metaphors of those suffering survivor syndrome. Unfortunately, "there is no single recipe for a successful intervention." (Noer, p. 37)

Management, once the most respected profession, has become a profession of violation. The public no longer values the contribution public servants make. They no longer rise up when devastating cuts are made to programs that help the poor. Taxpayers have reached the limits of their willingness to pay more for public services benefiting the common good, yet must and will pay when the service is privatized.

Welcome to public administration in the 1990s.

But there is a challenge inherent in public management today about which managers can feel positive. This is the new challenge to be innovative in our work. Bureaucracy has been notorious for resisting and squashing innovation. Now is the chance for the "brightest and best" of the 1970s who flocked to work for governments across Canada, to use their imaginations and creativity as never before. Granted, this opportunity presents itself in a context of scarcity and shrinkage rather than growth, to which we have been accustomed to throughout our careers (although that is rarely how it felt at the time). But within that constraint, politicians, the public and senior and middle level public servants may be willing to consider change as never before.

Are we up to the challenge? Do we know how to think in other paradigms? Let's find out. It is time to address the many problems which have been apparent for 25 years, but with which we have not yet dealt: our inability to motivate and truly assist the poorly educated and unemployed, a model for employing the mentally ill and mentally disabled, to rehabilitate criminals, to preserve our stocks of renewable resources, to support Canadian industry in the international marketplace. Or, as Stuart Conger described it 25 years ago, now is our chance to invent ways to alleviate poverty, create jobs, achieve inter-racial accord, reduce crime, increase family harmony, overcome addiction, cure mental illness, provide adequate housing, and settle labour disputes (Conger, 1974).

How can we do this? By creating a culture within public service which is not suspicious but supportive of innovation. We have examples of governments in Canada which have sometimes succeeded: Saskatchewan, Prince Edward Island, British Columbia, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick. They have created new institutions, new approaches, new processes, and they have in recent years been acknowledged for it through the IPAC Innovation Award.

How have they succeeded? Based on the work I have done on innovation in the Saskatchewan provincial government of 1971-82 (Glor, 1997), I have summarized my thoughts below. Innovation in Saskatchewan encompassed an ongoing process of developing a positive climate for innovation, creating new ideas, bringing innovations into being, managing them well, securing the results desired and reinforcing development and implementation of more innovations. Finally, securing feedback about the results leads to the ongoing fine-tuning needed to create a culture of excellence and innovation.

One of the surprises for me was to realize how important the government's political agenda had been in Saskatchewan to introduction of 133 policy and process innovations during its government of 1971-82. Another was the key role that the bureaucracy had played over a long period in discovering, inventing and demonstrating innovations before they had become government policy.

The implementation stage was just as important. Effective innovation was not just a question of coming up with ideas, but also of developing and realizing them successfully. The usual markers of excellence and effective program development, implementation and evaluation were evident here. So was something not as familiar - political and bureaucratic will.

The outcomes were as varied and sometimes unexpected, as with other human endeavours. Some innovations failed, but others satisfied those who must be pleased in order for innovation to continue - politicians and senior bureaucrats - as well as those who created the innovations and those who brought them into being and managed them.

Not least of all, the media, interest groups and the public-at-large for the most part formed positive impressions of the innovative efforts, especially during the early years of the government, when it was most innovative. Because support for innovations was linked to political support, public servants had to be flexible in their capacity to present innovations in a manner consistent with the political platforms of their elected masters. Only with positive reactions to attempted innovations and public acceptance of change and adaptation, was it possible to create the environment necessary for ongoing or at least repeated innovation in Saskatchewan.

Other governments and other public servants can be innovative too.

About the Author
Eleanor Glor Eleanor, an executive with Health Canada, organizes The Innovation Salon and is Editor of The Innovation Journal.

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