

Review Essay

Edwards, M., & Langford, D. Eds.

New Players, Partners and Processes: A Public Sector without Boundaries?

University of Canberra: National Institute for Governance, 2002.

Reviewed by: David C. Dibbon,

Meredith Edwards and John Langford have collaborated to produce a book that will be very useful for academics interested in public sector management, students of public administration, practicing government workers, politicians and anyone else interested in learning more about how the new public sector functions. Through the use of many practical examples readers will easily understand and relate to the issues surrounding public sector reform initiatives. In reading the individual papers, readers will be challenged to think about the way governments operate and what is required to ensure good governance for a country and its citizens.

The book itself consists of a collection of extremely insightful, well written, and sometimes candid papers, commentaries and discussions, that report on an international symposium designed to ask critical questions about the nature of governance in an era when traditional models of governance are being challenged. To facilitate the dialogue leading practitioners and academics from Australia and Canada were invited to prepare and present papers that dealt with spanning the traditional boundaries between government departments, public sector agencies and private and third sector organizations, and also those between citizens and communities on the one hand and government decision makers on the other. The book is divided into four sections that reflect on four specific boundary spanning initiatives in Australia and Canada.

In Section 1, the focus is on the engagement of the private sector in public sector service delivery and Professors Good and Considine introduce the reader to the complex and often tense relationship that exists between government, parliament, the public service and the private provider. In Section 2, Professors Langford and McClelland focus on the management of public-private partnerships, a concept that seems achievable, but in reality provides enormous governance and management challenges for governments. These papers focus on strategies for overcoming some of the management challenges.

In Section 3, Professors Dobell and Wellman turn their attention to the importance of building community based management into contemporary governance so that local communities have some tenure in decision-making. In Section 4, Professors Stewart and Lindquist focus their papers on the practical utility of working across the traditional boundaries of government to develop and improve public services. They also investigate the potential for horizontal management to improve public sector service delivery.

Overall this is an excellent book filled with many interesting accounts of attempts at boundary spanning and public sector reform. While the comparative aspect of the book helps to clarify similarities and differences between the two countries and their experiences with reform, a

value-added feature is the richness of the commentaries and informed discussions that appear at the end of each section. By structuring the book in this manner the authors are able to reflect the boundary spanning theme that highlighted the symposium upon which this edition is based. Interestingly, their experience led them to conclude that boundary spanning as a reform initiative has been at best modestly successful and that perhaps the best example of boundary spanning that occurred was the symposium itself.

Finally, the results of the symposium and the individual papers support a growing body of research that highlights the difficulty in moving from policy development to practice. While many of the authors did state the importance of leadership and risk management to the success of these initiatives, I suggest that in order to gain a better understanding of the dynamics that impact the implementation of such initiatives a future conference should invite papers that also deal with leadership, and culture transformation within the public sector. Knowing more about the culture and leadership within the public sector will contribute to a greater understanding of the challenges associated with spanning traditional boundaries as well as public sector reform in general.

In conclusion, let me reiterate that this is an excellent book; one that I enjoyed immensely and feel comfortable recommending highly for readers interested in learning specifically about boundary spanning initiatives in Australia and Canada as well as for readers who are interested in learning more about reform initiatives taking place in the public sector.

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