Practitioner’s Perspective—Have We Missed the Boat on Planning?

Hierarchical government bureaucracy has been the predominant organizational model for delivering public services and fulfilling public policy goals. Public managers were and continue to be rewarded by accomplishing highly routine, professional tasks with uniformity. However, increasing complexity in scope is forcing public officials to develop new governance models. In many ways, our problems simultaneously have become both more global and more local. We are now sailing in uncharted, turbulent waters, and the traditional, hierarchical government model is strained to meet the complex demands of the twenty-first century.

For most of the twentieth century, the image of a proper organization was the pyramid, bureaucracy, and division of labor. The twenty-first century has brought a range of changes, including the complexity of the work to be done; technological innovations and change; the virtualization of the workforce; diversity of a grand scale, ranging from diversity of thought to a multigenerational, multiethnic workforce; and large numbers of people exercising independent judgment, not simply following orders through a rigid, linear chain of command. In the public sector, there is even the beginning of a shift from top-down vertical environments and management structure toward more horizontal, collaborative methods of organizing and working.

The real question we should ask is, can strategy be developed in the twenty-first-century public sector with a bureaucracy that is steeped in twentieth-century practices? The answer is maybe. Often, the term “strategic” is used (if perhaps overused or misused) as a way of signaling to the outside world that there is a broad, outward, and forward-looking grasp of the environment. Let’s define public sector strategic planning as what it really is: public sector strategic planning is oriented toward and focuses on the results of the current political administration. Strategy in the public sector covers both the political positioning of a department and the internal management of the organization. The focus is on setting program and policy direction: identifying aims, output, and outcomes; and setting long-term vision. The current leadership within the organization is the driving force of public sector strategic planning. So, it is internally focused. The purpose and the mission of the public sector organization are generally externally determined.

So how can we reconcile the external demand for results with the internal focus of strategic planning? We must view strategic planning differently than it is seen today. We must institutionalize and demand that strategic thinking occur within every level of the organization. Strategic planning can no longer be the work of a few in a strategic planning office. Each employee must not only do a specific job, but also must address some fundamental questions each and every day: How can we better serve the American public? How do we measure our success? What are the competing alternatives for the federal dollar? Who is our customer, what do our customers need now, and what will our customers need in the future? Today in the public sector, strategy must be developed based on customer needs and anticipating the challenges of the future.

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When we look at the problems facing the United States, the federal government must rethink its entire approach to policy design, priorities, strategies, and management in order to remain relevant in a changing society. How can we remain relevant when faced with a large and long-term fiscal imbalance, evolving national and homeland security policies, increased global interdependence, and a shifting economy? How are we going to face these challenges with planning? How will a systematic arrangement of elements help solve these problems? It can’t. It won’t. And it hasn’t. So what do we need to do? We must integrate strategic thinking at every level throughout the organization.

We need to reconcile the top-down hierarchy, built along vertical lines of authority, with emerging networks built along horizontal lines of action and accountability. All public sector employees need to focus on the interplay among the environment, the organization, the public good, and the future. All public sector employees need to employ innovative lateral thinking. Good and great ideas don’t always come from the top of an organization. Good and great ideas can come from anyone in an organization. Good and great ideas are nonhierarchical. Organizations can no longer be endlessly managed, copying yesterday’s practices to achieve success. Business conditions change and yesterday’s assumptions and practices no longer work. There must be innovation, and innovation means change. Change must be led. And we know that leadership drives public sector strategic planning.

It is clear that public sector strategic planning is evolving. Strategic thinking must become an essential part of all employees’ daily responsibilities in looking at a few approaches to improve their service delivery and to ensure their accountability for performance to their customers. Securing competitive advantages in the private market or achieving mandates in the public sector requires an organization to not only explore outside opportunities and threats, but also to create and sustain distinguished internal competence that can provide an edge over its competing organizations and succeed in securing resources to achieve its goals. There must be openness to learning and understanding of the interrelationship of ideas, no matter who they come from, at what level of the organization. The character of our society and the institutions in it cannot be safely bound to any currently held ideas, nor can they be altered radically to conform to any fixed idea of what they ought to be in the future.

Clearly, there must be an external focus on results. Rational linear analysis will not solve the problems, but instead the problems can be solved through creative, intuitive, and lateral thinking—strategy, not planning. The planning boat sailed at the conclusion of the twentieth century. Bon voyage. There is no clear map for sailing these uncharted waters of the twenty-first century. The only thing we know is that the future demands that we focus on taking action, on creativity, on working within a complex web of relationships, on integrative thinking, on thinking in general (not just doing), on distributing and sharing responsibility, on looking beyond, and, most importantly on building something different tomorrow—not only incrementally improving on today. Hear the call: all aboard the strategy boat!