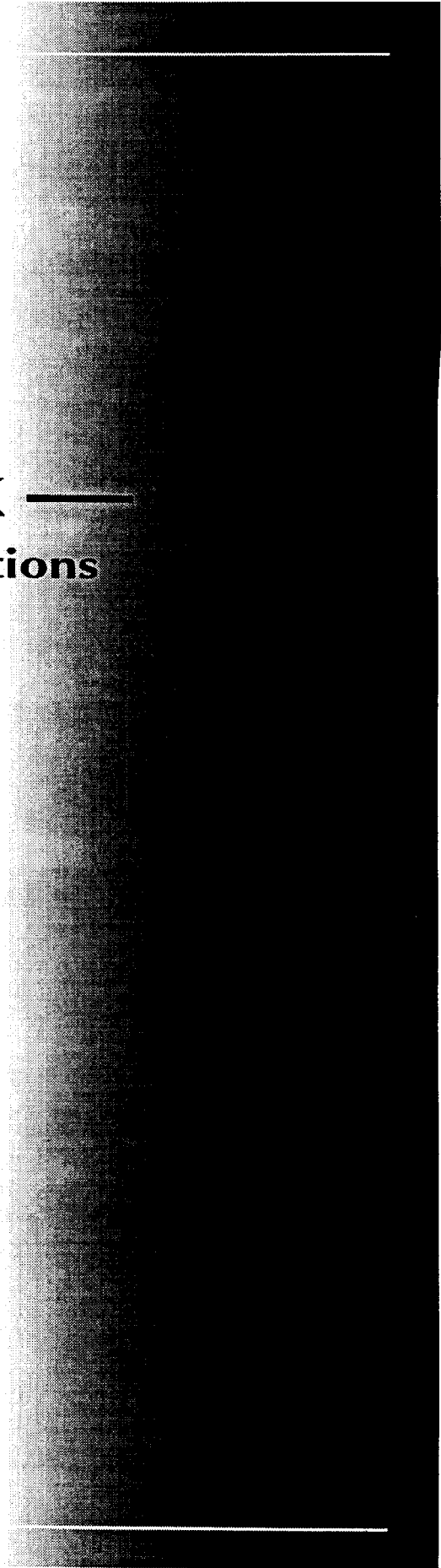

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**Introducing
Change and
Making It Stick —
Sorting Out the Contradictions**



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If we have learned anything in public service reform over the past thirty years, it is that introducing measures is one thing but making them stick is quite another.

We have seen a veritable plethora of measures designed to reform government operations introduced in virtually all Western countries during the past fifteen years or so. Canada is no exception. One only has to think back to IMAA, Make or Buy policies, Special Operating Agencies, TQM, PS 2000 to appreciate how ambitious the government of Canada has been in its desire to reform its operations. Informed observers are hardly making the case that all or, in fact any of these reform measures, have been successfully implemented. But in the process, we have learned a thing or two about how to introduce reform measures and how one can go about making them stick. In addition, we can look abroad to other countries to see how governments there sought to implement reform measures. There is now a growing body of literature reporting on the success (or lack of success) of government reform measures introduced in Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Sweden and the United States from which we can draw some lessons.

This brief paper reports on some of the ways governments have approached change and their attempts to make it stick. We soon discover that there are "pros" and "cons" to the various approaches. Indeed, no one approach is without a downside. If this were not the case,

governments everywhere would by now have in their possession the "magic bullet" needed to introduce and successfully implement reform measures.

Champions Are Needed

The first lesson learned out of Britain during the Thatcher years was that a strong *political champion* was needed not only to promote government reform measures but also to ensure follow up and to push the "system" to implement change. "The lady was not for turning," as Thatcher herself explained, and once she set a new course for government reform, she expected everyone to push in the same direction.

Thatcher stayed the course and took a strong personal interest in the implementation of reform measures. She insisted on regular briefings and in many instances sought to master administrative details. From time to time, she even transferred to her own office, administrative-type decisions. She did this, for example, in the case of the scrutinies process. If nothing else, this sent a strong signal to permanent officials that she meant business. There is no substitute for political will when tough decisions are needed to challenge long-established ways of doing things and to maintain the momentum of change. The point here is that "political will" works in trying to make government reform measures stick.

Champions of change are also needed at the public service level. Senior government officials are obviously busy people and the details of the day often serves to crowd out more important issues. However urgent the political and administrative crisis, senior officials need

to keep their eyes on the "ball" of government reforms. Change can never take flight on its own merits, it has to be energized.

Champions Are Not Enough

Political champions come and go and permanent officials know this better than anyone. A politician can issue a press release every day to stress the importance of government reform measures to show his or her commitment, but unless rank and file employees are prepared to buy into the reforms then the proposed changes will likely die on the vine. Unless they see merit in the proposed reform measures, rank and file employees will simply batten down the hatches and wait for the political storm to pass. The above to say that administrative reforms will not succeed unless it is "owned" by the lower echelons of the organizations.

We can point to evidence and arguments to support both sides of this apparent contradiction. It may be that to be successful both the top and the bottom of organizations must be involved, although paradoxically if there were that much agreement within government concerning what was necessary to produce greater effectiveness then the formal reform efforts might not have been needed. If there is not, and there rarely is, such wide agreement about the problems in government and the appropriate reform strategies then we need to identify the impetus for reform in different systems - champions at either the political or administrative levels are simply not enough.

Communication Is Key

It is often said that it is impossible for government managers to “overcommunicate” when planning and implementing change. Managers have “stakeholders” outside as well as employees inside always interested in the nature of the changes being proposed or the progress being realized during the various implementation phases. Outside “stakeholders” do not only include “clients” but also elected politicians and other government officials. These, in turn, include those working in central agencies and oversight bodies.

Why is communication key? Unless one is satisfied to play at the margin, any important reform attempt must seek to change the organization’s culture in some way. At the risk of overgeneralization, the organizational culture found in most government departments and agencies has the following characteristics: a consensus-based decision-making process; a strong emphasis on low-risk conservative approaches; and planning geared to the short term or at best the medium term. Again, at the risk of overgeneralizing, the reinventing government movement seeks to promote a more entrepreneurial approach to decision making, to encourage risk taking, promote rapid decisions and attach a strong importance on serving “client needs.”

Changing an organization’s culture is no small task. Government departments and agencies have developed a culture over many, many years. Many employees no doubt have become comfortable with their departmental culture. They know what is expected of them

and intuitively how to survive in the organization. It is wrong to assume that change, even well thought-out change, will always be welcomed within or even outside the organization.

Hence, if the objective is to change the culture, then one "cannot overcommunicate." Many people will have a stake in the old culture and, of course, in any plan for change. To win over employees will be the first priority, of course, but there will be others. There are many outside groups which need to be informed of the proposed changes and what the impact will be on them.

The central purpose in promoting a strong communication strategy is to develop a sense of "team spirit" and a sense that all employees can contribute directly to a new way of doing things. Most government agencies have various field offices so that communication between offices, let alone between employees, is not always easy or evident. Indeed, different organizational cultures can take root between head office and the field offices. When important changes are contemplated, unless strong communication mechanisms are put in place, rumours or stories in newspapers may be where employees get their information.

Communication Is Not Without Problems

While communication is key to the successful implementation of government reforms, a new and stronger focus on communication could well also give rise to new problems in government departments. Senior managers may become so preoccupied with reform and the

need to communicate with employees to explain the reform measures that they could lose sight of their true mandate - to manage the operations of the departments. Similarly, rank and file employees may become so consumed with the proposed reforms, the inevitable reorganization and the gossip that in the service to clients suffers. In brief, the attention needed by both senior managers and rank and file employees to communication could well defeat the very purpose of the proposed reforms - better service to clients.

Central Agencies Must Buy In

Central agencies often like to portray themselves as champions of change. They sit at the apex of the permanent government, often provide the link between politicians and the machinery of government and usually employ the best and the brightest in government. Given their strategic position, central agencies can often speak not only on behalf of the political leaders, but also on behalf of the institutional interests of the civil service. They have all the ingredients to be the true agents of change. In any event, given their position in the machinery of government, one can easily assume that without support from the central agencies, reform measures will have little chance of success.

Observers, however, are increasingly making the point that although central agencies have been at the centre of the reform process, they have done little about changing their own structures and behaviours. If, however, central agencies introduce fundamental changes to their operations, it may well compromise other important public policy goals. There are

always political fires to put out and central agencies are expected to take the lead in putting them out. If they are unable to perform on this front because they have shifted focus or because they have lost influence, the government will quickly move in to "fix" the problem. Fixing the problem would very likely mean "empowering" still more the centre which would fly in the face of what government reform measures were first designed to accomplish. In addition, central agencies are always trying to cope with policy contradictions and conflicting goals. For example, they are expected to delegate more authority to departments and agencies to empower front line employees but at the same time they are also being asked to promote affirmative action in government hiring practices and identifying new areas to cut spending.

Training and Development

New reform measures need to be conceptually sound, they need to correspond to the requirements of the departments and champions of change need to be assembled for the efforts to succeed. But even when these three ingredients exist, it will not be enough. Managers and employees require proper orientation, training and development opportunities.

To be sure, senior officials must take specific measures to unfreeze the status quo and to highlight the importance and benefits of change. However, managers and employees may resist change unless they feel confident that they possess the knowledge and the skills to implement the desired change. Without such skills, they will naturally gravitate towards the

familiar, to what existed before. That world will look more comfortable because they know how it works and what is required of them.

A recurring theme in recent government reform measures is that a new "learning culture" should be introduced at all levels of the organization. Change inevitably requires new knowledge, new skills and a problem solving capacity which has not been extensively relied upon in the past. Introducing a successful learning culture is in itself no small achievement. Traditionally, governments have rarely attached a high priority to executive development and training. Indeed, training and development budgets have usually been the first to be cut in rounds of austerity. In addition, training and development have in the past rarely been taken seriously as a principal means of advancement in government.

The above suggests that you have to change "two cultures," the one found in government departments and agencies and another which suggests that training and development is largely a waste of resources. Put differently, the one management tool available to instill a new culture in government operations - executive development and training - is itself in need of a "cultural change." In addition, promoting training and development in an era of government cutbacks is no easy task. Politicians and even senior managers may well be reluctant to allocate resources to training and development - seen by many at best as a luxury item - at a time when their own pet programs are being cut back or even eliminated.

Reforms Must Have A Clear Deadline

The history of reforming government teaches us that without a major effort and a sense of mission with a firm timetable, any reform will be killed by the entrenched forces of the status quo. That does not mean that officials (political or career) will consciously sabotage attempts at change, but only that inertia is a powerful force in any organization, public or private.

On the other hand, most enduring change requires long-term commitment and evolutionary, rather than revolutionary, efforts. The Gore Commission and its follow-up bodies, for example, appears to understand the long-term nature of reform somewhat better than most other efforts. They have conceptualized the reform process as being at least a ten-year adventure and have been planning with enough flexibility to entertain some diversions along the way.

The experiences of reform in the United Kingdom and New Zealand further illuminate the relationship between time and reform. On the one hand reform in New Zealand had largely a "big bang" approach with a very rapid implementation of the ideas of the incoming Labour government in 1987. This was announced not so much as a program but rather as a set of principles by which the reform would take place. Corporatisation was clearly the result of a committed government that appeared capable of sweeping away any opposition and getting on with the business of implementing change. Further, these reforms could not be achieved through incremental means but rather represented a radical transformation of the system that might not have been possible save through such quick and decisive action.

The major reforms beginning during the Thatcher years in Britain, on the other hand, have occurred over almost a decade and a half and have been, for all their apparent radical character, actually implemented in a rather slow and deliberate manner. The Next Steps initiative was announced almost seven year ago, and implementation of the original plans remains far from complete. Without the remarkable experience of fifteen years of unbroken control of government by the Conservative party and the leadership of one exceptional prime minister for most of that time, it does not seem likely that these reforms would have had the impact that they have. This impact has been heightened by the capacity of a government in office for that long a period to change the culture of the civil service (as well as many top civil servants themselves) and therefore to minimize resistance to change. These reforms continue to be expanded and implemented under the Major government, with some even more significant changes in the structure of the senior civil service under consideration.

Looking Back

The above is not to make the case that government reformers are in disarray or that there are so many contradictions in any approach to reforming government operations that reform measures should not even be attempted. It only makes the point that reforming government operations is no easy task. If it were easy, or if there were a magic bullet available, countries everywhere would have completed the job a long time ago. The fact that the most ambitious and the most successful countries at reforming government operations are still at it with no

sign yet that the job is nearing completion speaks to the difficulties and the inherent contradictions in implementing reform measures. It also speaks to the challenge at hand.

The solution is not to search for the right approach or the right formula to implement change. Rather, the solution is to study very carefully the political and institutional setting in which the reforms will be introduced and to shape the approach accordingly. The "one size fits all" approach does not match the reality of a complex public sector. Government is not a uniform entity but rather represents a huge variety of organizational formats, management problems and program delivery strategies. The managerial styles and organizational cultures even within a single government will be significantly different. Anyone attempting to impose a uniform policy for administrative reform quickly discovers that the problems are different in different policy areas and in different organizations. What this suggests is that an implementation strategy for reforming government operations has, above all, to be flexible. Indeed, we may well need as many implementation strategies as there are departments expected to introduce fundamental changes to their operations.