

# Public Management Report

An occasional (and maybe insightful) examination of the issues, dilemmas, challenges, and opportunities in leadership, governance, management, and performance in public agencies.

On the reason why:

## Stovepipe Bureaucracies Live

Bureaucracies are out; networks are in. Stovepipes are out; collaboration is in. Just read any recent book on the future of government. It will inform you of the demise of stovepipe bureaucracies and the new imperative of collaborative networks.

Moreover, such books will offer a variety of examples—of innovative leaders who created an effective network; of a clutch of collaborators who molded a collection of once antagonistic individuals into a high-performing team.

Of course, these stories could have been written ten or a hundred years ago. Collaborative networks are not a twenty-first- or even a twentieth-century invention. Families and tribes relied upon them—even before we humans invented formal organizations. Now, however, a century after Max Weber told us of the wonders of bureaucracies, we are plagued by the rigidities of stovepipes and thus have become captivated by the new wonders of collaboration.

In his book on *Paul Revere's Ride*, David Hackett Fischer reports that, in Boston during the American Revolution, the British and the Americans organized the task of gathering intelligence in very different ways—each with its advantages and deficiencies.

"The British system was created and controlled from the top down," writes Fischer. "It

centered very much on General [Thomas] Gage himself." Gage was both the Royal Governor of Massachusetts and commander in chief of the British army, which collected information in response to their boss's questions. Fischer

observes that this system had both strengths and weaknesses. It focused resources on the boss's questions, though Gage "was often told the answer that he wished to hear. Worse, the questions that he did not think to ask were never answered at all."

In contrast, Revere and his friends organized their system "from the bottom up." Individuals and groups self selected to collect intelligence. "These efforts were coordinated through an open, disorderly network of congresses and committees, but no central authority controlled this activity." Fischer emphasizes that "no one was in charge." This system too had pluses and minuses. It was "highly inefficient," reports Fischer, but was also "a source of energy, initiative, and intellectual strength."

Yet, to read today's management literature, you would think that we have just discovered networks—let alone gotten an appreciation of the relative advantages and disadvantages of hierarchies and networks.

Moreover, the choice about organizational arrangements isn't inflexibly binary. We are not required to choose between perfect hierar-



chies and pure networks. We can have a mixture. Indeed, most hierarchical bureaucracies are also networks. Yes, the hierarchy does establish formal lines of communication and authority and create formal responsibilities for each individual within the bureaucracy. But any bureaucracy that accomplishes anything contains multiple, functioning, informal networks. For a bureaucracy to do anything of significance, it needs collaboration across its own internal boundaries. The hierarchy provides the organizational framework within which networks are formed and collaboration happens.

So why doesn't government just eliminate stovepipe bureaucracies and create collaborative networks? Why not eliminate this organizational middleman? If we observe that the real work in any effective organization gets done through networks and collaboration, why not start by simply creating collaborative networks to do the work?

*Government's bureaucracies are not going away. We need to accept that within such formal structures, networks and collaboratives will do much of the work and build effective relationships across stovepipe boundaries.*

Answer: Because legislators love bureaucratic stovepipes. Legislators have very specific ideas about what government should do. And, to ensure that these tasks get done, they assign each one to a specific, bureaucratic stovepipe. This fixed, formal organizational arrangement provides legislators with the ability to make a specific assignment to a specific unit. And, having made such an assignment, legislators then know whom to ask for an account of progress on the assignment. Finally, if the results are not achieved, the legislators know whom to punish.

Legislators, of course, rail against the rigidities of bureaucracies as much as anyone. They love to tell horror stories—particularly during televised hearings—about a public agency that failed to help some citizen because two stovepipes couldn't talk with each other.

But who created these stovepipe structures? The bureaucrats? Of course not. Nor did the bureaucracies stream full-formed from

some underground spring buried beneath the capitol building or city hall. The bureaucracies were created by legislation—by legislators. If legislators wanted to get rid of these bureaucracies, they could. But they don't.

How would a legislator give an assignment to a network? How would a legislator ask a collaborative for an account of what it has accomplished? And whom, within a collaborative network, would a legislator punish for some kind of performance failure?

Government's stovepipe bureaucracies are not going away. They are not going away because they help legislators—and managers—do their job. We need to accept that bureaucracies have many organizational characteristics that, for many purposes, are very useful. At the same time, we need to recognize that, within these formal, hierarchical structures, much of the work will be done by networks and collaboratives.

Thus, we should turn our attention to the challenge of building effective networks within bureaucracies. We should develop strategies for creating collaborations across stovepipe boundaries. We should concentrate our attention on how to make these different—and seemingly contradictory—organizational arrangements function well together. **B**

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