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Viewpoint

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Change, Complexity, and Leadership Challenges

*We better stop now, what's that sound? Everybody look—
what's going down?*

—Buffalo Springfield, 1967

We look now, and what do we see? A rate of change and complexity we have never experienced. Maybe it is not unexpected that amid this environment we see a reaction—a foundational desire to connect to our identity, an anchor in our lives. We can find this complexity and an accelerated pace of change in the disciplines of the administrative or operational world (think “smart cities,” for example). On the other hand, in the political arena, we find the challenge of grounding our lives in a seemingly stable, simplistic world that often produces “us and them.” It comes to a head in the contemporary version of that enduring theme—politics and administration—producing new leadership challenges.

In this column, we chart with a broad brush what we see happening in contemporary local government—centered on what we are calling the gap between political acceptability (politics) and administrative or operational sustainability (administration). Then, we identify and describe associated leadership challenges and the mind-set and skills/talents needed to “bridge the gap.”

Bridging the gap is the essential prerequisite for effective governance. Political acceptability focuses on what it is we want to accomplish and the dynamics around building support among competing political initiatives. But can we do what we want to accomplish, and can we do it over time? An assumption is that this process of connecting politics and administration begins with the political (vision, mission, policy initiative). But in our experience, that is not always the case. Frequently, the process of improving a water treatment plant or virtually any other infrastructure investment is initiated by a need—an element of administrative sustainability—and then the question of political will is engaged.

There is nothing new in setting out this dynamic back-and-forth relationship. We understand that without effective bridges between political and administrative arenas, little is accomplished, and trust in public servants—both political and professional—erodes and the value of government itself can be questioned. Acknowledging the tension surrounding the need to maintain integrity in political and administrative arenas, something is happening that is making the gap between these two arenas—these two mind-sets—more difficult to bridge, fostering new leadership challenges.

To better understand the challenges faced in connecting political acceptability and administrative sustainability, we propose the metaphor of the bridge, stimulating several observations. For example, there is not one bridge; each policy initiative or administrative/operational need may have its own bridge, which may or may not be constructed on a sound foundation and connect political and administrative worlds. Some bridges will be longer than others, suggesting a longer time span to make connections. Some will be wider, suggesting more parties on the bridge and maybe more potential for “accidents.” Some bridges will be both long and wide. And some may lead to nowhere!

Traditionally in council-manager government, we expect the city manager to work the bridge. This expectation is captured in the familiar graphic of a governing body and administrative staff separated by a city manager. But as the bridges multiply and become longer and wider and invite more engagement, the work often leads to dead ends. The bridging task becomes more challenging (Nalbandian et al. 2013).

Leadership Challenges

The *first challenge* focuses on roles and responsibilities, particularly of department heads or the equivalent. We used to describe the city manager and department heads collectively as a “management team.”

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We do not hear that concept much anymore. The concept of a “leadership team” has replaced it. The difference is captured in yet another metaphor. Effective leadership team members are “bilingual.” They can speak across the bridge, understanding the constellations of political logic and community dynamics as well as the administrative mind-set. Some leadership team members will be fluent and effective at translation; others may be just learning, which can start with simple understanding. In the process of learning, leadership team members must avoid “political capture,” whereby they are seen as favoring one political group over another, thus losing credibility with the governing body as a whole. On the other hand, they must avoid losing the confidence of those in the organization who are bringing a more technical mind-set and expectations to the governance process.

As the bridging process becomes more challenging—in part because more third parties are involved—community allies of the leadership team and the bridge-building process must be acknowledged, sought out, and nurtured. For example, a “smart city” initiative may gain more political acceptability if it is endorsed and led by a third-party vendor that has credibility and visibility beyond an individual jurisdiction. Or a traffic engineer consultant who is bilingual can become a valued asset when it comes to a controversial traffic control proposal.

The third-party inclusion in the gap metaphor leads to our *second leadership challenge*—the dimensions of the problems that local governments face increasingly extend beyond existing political boundaries. This places a premium on cross-sectoral and interjurisdictional collaboration. Part of this challenge is that, most often, the required collaboration presents itself without the benefit of a clear authority structure and with possible tension between goals, objectives, and approaches of the parties. And it is not as if only one interjurisdictional/sectoral challenge exists at a time. Boundary-challenging issues such as the environment, transportation, economic development, and health care do not present themselves neatly and sequentially. At least at the start, they are messy problems without definition and with many parties taking initiative to construct bridges (Heifetz 2003).

Our *third challenge* focuses on citizen engagement. Traditional forms of connecting with citizens have become “artifacts” of a time before social media when people looked to their representatives as “trustees.” Dalton and Welzel (2015) argue that the “assertive citizen” is replacing the “allegiant citizen.” New forms of engagement are emerging (Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015) and, combined with the assertive citizen, the lines between administrative and political work becomes blurry. For example, is a community budget prioritization project a political or administrative activity? What role do we expect the budget/finance director to play in this kind of exercise? (Farmer 2016).

While more and more avenues exist for citizens to express their views, few forums can be found that require citizens to confront the consequences of those views in a deliberate fashion. In other words, as we see ourselves moving from allegiant to assertive citizenship, and as a representative role for elected officials becomes more common than the trustee role, deliberative engagement becomes essential. Another way of looking at this argument is through the lens of the “public participation spectrum” developed by the International Association of Public Participation (2014). The spectrum sets out expectations for engagement as we move from an “informing” public purpose to an “empowering” purpose.

Each of our three challenges—roles and responsibilities, structures, and engagement processes—invites the question, “What is the profile of 21st century leadership?” Bob O’Neill’s face-to-face interviews with plenary speakers at annual city manager conferences informs this profile. Figure 1 illustrates the nine leadership attributes that are required for successful leadership in the complex and highly diffused power structure of local government today. While no one person would likely possess strengths in all of the attributes, it is important to try to develop a leadership team with complementary strengths covering all them.

Symphonic Skills

Many observers, including Jim Collins (2007), have described “symphonic skills” as quintessential talents for leaders in complex and rapidly changing environments. The metaphor invites a picture



Figure 1 Nine Leadership Attributes

of an orchestra with many different instruments and artists, each skilled in his or her own way and perhaps each with an idea of how a piece should be played. The idea of symphonic skills invokes the image of the orchestra leader. While at the concert, we see a seemingly smooth production, but we know that behind the scenes, rehearsals often invoking trial and error and experimentation are essential. And so we also know that local governments dealing with issues that are multijurisdictional, multidisciplinary, multisectoral, and intergovernmental require leadership that can make the whole greater than the sum of its parts.

Connecting the Power of Story

Brain science now tells us that humans are hardwired for story, not data. Most professionals have been taught to present “just the facts.” We now know that we must explain the facts/data with stories that will produce both an intellectual and emotional connection to the issue (Gardner 1995). The story becomes more important as the operational/administrative work becomes more complex. A great example is trying to explain the complexity of smart cities to a lay audience, including elected officials. In this sense, the story becomes the vehicle of translation.

Developing Design Literacy in All Leaders

According to Daniel Pink (2005, 2008) there is a design implication in every decision. Whether it is a public process, a new facility, or a website, the design will be a determining factor in the ultimate outcome. Most of us have experienced the disaster of the traditional public hearing dealing with a controversial, value-laden issue. The design of the engagement process heavily influences the likelihood of getting to a positive result.

Working Small to Achieve a Larger Vision

Collins (2007) describes the “incremental revolutionary” as a prototype for local government. Achieving small victories in order to build momentum and credibility to achieve a larger vision is essential when there is not concentrated power. The vision must be illustrated by small successes to sustain the commitment over time. These small successes are building blocks for the trust necessary to take risks, knowing at some point you will fail. Do you have enough trust to survive the failure inherent in the innovation process, so that failure is seen instead as “trial and error and learning”?

Architecture for Success

James McGregor Burns (1978) argues that leadership only exists when followers have the ability to opt out. If you can compel action or behavior, that is power and not leadership. Local governance requires leaders who create the conditions to get to yes. This is particularly challenging in the highly diffused power structure that is local government. Twenty-first-century leaders must use facilitation, convening, and persuasion as tools to create the conditions to reach decisions that will achieve the results that matter for communities.

Confronting the Brutal Facts but Staying Focused and Persistent

Collins (2001) interviewed Admiral Jim Stockdale and described the “Stockdale paradox.” Admiral Stockdale was the most senior officer captured during the Vietnam War. He described his imprisonment as the defining moment of his life, and it would

propel him to not only survive but also to sustain a life of service and achievement. Local government requires confronting brutal facts—economic, fiscal, and political—but always knowing you can prevail and progress toward making communities better places to live, work, and play. Collins (2001) shares a similar message when he introduces the “flywheel” concept. Successful organizations know what they are good at, and what they are good at is valued by others. This is the core of who they are, and their world revolves around this—sensitive to a changing environment that may require rethinking in ways that confront brutal facts.

Creating Spaces for Innovation

Communities and regions have become the engines of economic and social innovation in the world. Local governments and the organizations that serve them must continue to nurture this innovation in order to continue to succeed. Frans Johansson (2004, 2010) suggests that innovation will increasingly be found at the intersection of disciplines. Most of our organizations are built around silos that isolate rather than connect. We put engineers in the room with engineers and accountants in the room with accountants. What we know is most of the work that matters most to the people we serve in local government requires multidisciplinary, multisectoral connection. Leaders must create spaces, systems, and structures that encourage and facilitate this “multi” work.

As an example of spaces for innovation that local governments might consider, the federal General Services Administration has a unit called 18F, named curiously after an office location. Here is their mission as a message to their governmental partners: “As an office within the General Services Administration, we know how to work with government. Work with us to plan successful projects, build custom software, get better results with vendors, or learn how to work in new ways” (see <https://18f.gsa.gov/>). Consider if the local governments in a metro area created a unit like 18F.

Being Decisive

One of the compelling characteristics of effective leaders is the ability to foster engagement in a continuing search for information to help decision making. Harlan Cleveland (1972, 1974) stated that the real value proposition for public sector leaders is, “How do you get everyone in on the act and still get action?” Particularly during the Great Recession, we observed leaders who engaged stakeholders and searched for information but knew that in the best case the information would be incomplete and the options varied. However, effective leaders had an intuitive sense of when it was the time to act. Again we confront the issue of trust, which is embedded in our leadership profile. Are you trusted to act? Are you seen as a person who acts in self-interest? Or are you seen as one who acts for the good of the unit? If self-interest is perceived, it is likely that those working for you will try to protect themselves from your power. If you are seen as working in the greater good, those working for you are likely to be attracted to your exercise of authority and influence (McClelland and Burnham 2003).

The Power of Questions

In contrast to many popular descriptions, leadership in today’s world is more about asking the right questions than having the answers. As complexity and change increase, confronting conventional wisdom and asking probative questions is an

important leadership dimension of the twenty-first century. In fact, Donald Schön (1987) suggests succinctly that the difference between a professional and an amateur is that the amateur runs out of questions faster!

Reflecting on these leadership characteristics, two observations come to our minds. First, the profile gives substance to the notion that the concept of a “leadership team” is not simply a contemporary synonym for “management team.” The leadership team as an evolving concept is revealed in the number of metaphors we have used to describe the profile—symphonic, design literacy, and architecture of success, for example. Commonly, metaphors are used when a literal description of what we are trying to portray will not suffice. This is what the “leadership team” concept is. It is a term used to capture, at this changing point in time, the work being done at upper levels in local government.

Our second observation is that leadership puts a premium on personal qualities and predispositions—self-awareness. In the presence of a fluid distribution of organizational power due to changing environments, and in the absence of guidance from the past, one is very likely to draw on personal talents and skills and cognitive maps as guides to action. The overriding leadership quality in the present dynamic local government environment is self-awareness. What a leader convinces himself or herself is required for a unit/organization to be successful must not be confused with what the leader needs personally in order to be successful.

In conclusion, organizationally, we need to develop better structures that facilitate translating leadership to results and more and more opportunities for upcoming leaders to engage in guided development. Our observation is that many local governments have what they call leadership teams that are, in fact, management teams focused departmentally on the day-to-day execution of strategy. A leadership team should be different: interdisciplinary, focused on the future, and questioning whether the execution of today’s approaches actually leads to a desired future.

A leadership team exists only if four conditions are met. First, a shared vision must be crafted and embraced by those who can influence implementation. Second, adoption of a set of goals or outcomes designed for collective impact—often in the absence of hierarchy—must be evident. Third, there must be mutual

accountability for the goals and outcomes that have been agreed upon. The fourth condition is self-awareness and humility.

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