Emerging Trends within the Public Sector in Flanders: Towards a Self-organising Centre of Government

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Abstract

Changes in the socio-economic environment of the public sector challenge their internal management. Increasingly, organisations perform their managerial tasks in a result- oriented way, often by introducing private sector managerial techniques. More and more, innovative management techniques and mechanisms are explored, whether on a small project based scale or on a larger scale. So there is the rise of "new" policy instruments and the way administrations organize themselves.

In this paper, we examine the way the *Flemish Department of Public Governance and the Chancellery* is dealing with its new role as centre of government. Such a centers of governments are gaining importance in a complex political scenery confronted with wicked issues within a changing societal context.

Besides its positioning within the societal context, there is also a major internal shift within the department. Inspired by innovative management techniques, a transition is going on from a rather classical hierarchical structure to a network governance structure constituted by a set of self-organizing teams. From one day to another, all the hierarchy was removed within the departement. From 2015 on, the departement is organised as an self-steering network organisation.

In the paper, we present the changing positioning of the department and the way the internal transition is initiated and implemented further. Although the transition is initiated foremost in order to meet the requirements of a centre of government, we focus on the way the management of the departement as such. Besides, in the empirical part of the paper, we also use the data of a survey within the organisation dealing with the support of the transition and the new working principles. We also reflect on the way the theoretical ideas of self-organization are reflected in the management of the department.

Keywords: Public sector innovation, self-organizing teams, centre of government

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1. Introduction

Self-steering. Internet giants and developers of electric cars are fascinated by concepts of self-driving cars that will help us travel safely on our busy roads. In the public sector, we are also seeing more and more organisations that are focusing on the self-steering concept. Small-scale as well as major initiatives with self-steering as the trendy buzzword are popping up around the world.

A certain level of self-steering is often initiated as a way of dealing with the increasing complexity of societal problems in an equally complex environment where public authorities are seeking their (innovative) role. In the context of the complexity of the societal problems, self-organisation is now considered to be an organisational form that allows the public authorities to be much closer to the subject of their policy. In other words, the existing hierarchy is perceived in certain cases as an obstacle to solving societal problems (Tjpkema, 2003). Introducing "flatter" organisation structures is believed to be the alternative. Furthermore, the attention for self-steering also fits a new vision for how government should work. Instead of a controlling government we are gradually shifting to a facilitating government that is nested in a network of societal actors.

It is also in this context that we should position the Department of Public Governance and the

Chancellery. In the beginning of 2015, the organisation chose to become a self-steering networking organisation. The self-steering character refers mainly to the internal organisation, while the network organisation relates to the positioning of the department with regard to the other actors (Provan & Kenis, 2008). This evolution of the Department of Public Governance and the Chancellery must also be seen within the context of its role as centre of government within the Government of Flanders. For a discussion on the Department of Public Governance and the Chancellery (DPGC) as centre of government, we refer to the work of Vanhee & Erauw (2016). In the present contribution, we wish to discuss the "self-steering" aspect and the extent to which there is support for this organisational form within the organisation. In particular, we will take a more detailed look at the concept of "self-steering" before we discuss the results of the transition barometer.

2. Self-steering as a form of innovative work organisation

The extent to which and the method for implementing self-steering may vary significantly. The self-steering may only affect a very specific aspect of the work organisation (for example, arranging work schedules) or it may reshape an entire organisation based on the very same principle. The basic idea is that responsibility is granted to the core of the organisation, to groups that are given a framework and freedom to shape their own work activities. In this respect, self-steering is generally not about goals to be achieved, tasks and assignments, but about how they are implemented (Colman e.a., 2015).

Self-steering implies that the work organisation is supported by strong base units in the organisation such as teams. The requirements specified for such teams are consequently quite challenging. Organising self-steering work requires best practices and a culture which are adapted to this particular situation. In theory, the "manager - worker" relationship is replaced by a group where everyone manages everyone on an equal basis, and everyone can be approached by any other member of the group. In addition, every member of the group is expected to be committed to all the other members of the group. However, various roles may be assigned within the group to make things workable. Who is responsible for communications? Who assigns tasks? Who contacts others? Who is in charge of reporting? Who monitors progress? Et cetera.

The private sector is once again a source of inspiration - also for self-steering. The question is whether these private-sector solutions can be applied in a public context. Where is all this attention for self-steering in the public sector coming from? In the first place, it may provide an answer to the growing complexity of societal problems that currently require a different approach. It is in this context that we must place the changing role of government. Cost-cutting is another aspect of this organisational form. Its implementation obviously involves the reduction of the number of hierarchical levels and this may result in savings (Vermeer & Wenting, 2014). In addition, self-steering also promotes the development of individual employees. The concept implies that the skills of employees are optimized within self-steering teams, and this encourages intrinsic motivation (Marchington, M., 2000; Visser & Bunjes, 1995).

The following elements are mentioned when defining a self-steering team: a fixed group of employees, with a specific set of work activities, whereby the team itself takes care of preparing, organising, implementing, planning and controlling. In particular, self-steering teams not only take care of these activities, they are also responsible for them.

Many misunderstandings exist with regard to self-steering. For instance, it is not synonymous with free-for-all, chaos or uncertainty. And self-steering does not mean that all team members must be able to perform all tasks, or that the team leader has nothing to say and can't intervene when necessary. Another misconception about self-steering is that everyone must discuss

everything with everybody else and that one's own team counts most (De Bondt, e.a., 2016).

An important principle is that comprehensive task packages must be measurable and clear. The team must also be given sufficient autonomy without affecting the mutual dependence and alignment within and between the teams. The number of team members varies between 4 and 20 and they can typically be employed for a wide range of tasks. A team-driven system for operations and rewards is key besides the team identity (Schuyt, 2013).

We often see that self-steering begins as a leap in the dark (Verlet e.a., 2016). So you have to be able to deal with (informative and strategic) uncertainty. Unfortunately, a cookbook for off-the-shelf self-steering has not been written yet. Self-steering needs to grow and bloom in the specific environment and is based on day-to-day activities. It not only requires performance management but also a serious dose of people management. In fact, confidence is one of the basic ingredients of self-steering. It's essential that self-steering starts with the objective of the organisation. In the context of government, this generally refers to providing services to citizens or other organisations.

In the following discussion we look at how the Department of Public Governance and the Chancellery started their journey towards a self-steering network organisation. More specifically, we will focus on the attitude towards this transition within the Department of Public Governance and the Chancellery (DPGC). To do this, we use the transition barometer that allows us to measure the temperature within the organisation.

3. Positioning of the Department of Public Governance and the Chancellery as an organization where self-steering is given a central role

The Department of Public Governance and the Chancellery (DPCG) is one of the horizontal departments with an umbrella role across the sector-specific (vertical) policy areas. This is where the department believes it can make a difference. This follows from the department's vision statement: "Through our outspoken role as liaison between the policy areas, between the political and the administrative levels, and between government and society, we strive together towards an effective Government of Flanders that deals with the societal challenges of today and tomorrow, and towards a better Flanders." (DPGC, 2015).

To shape this ambition from an organisational point of view, we have chosen a self-steering network organisation. The teams will be the cornerstones of the new organisation. We have chosen a self-steering organisation with teams where responsibility and collegiality are central. In practice, team members always align first with their colleagues in the team. In fact, this means that the approval of practical matters shifts from the manager to the team.

However, strong teams are not enough to ensure that a department functions properly. Effective collaboration between the teams is just as important. This can also be achieved by working project-based for example. An important advantage of projects is that they prevent stagnation in teams and provide the flexibility required to deal with current and new assignments.

The central actors in the department include the secretary-general, the advisory group and various working groups, including the network amplifiers.

The secretary-general leads the Department of Public Governance and the Chancellery. In this role, his is responsible for defining the mission, vision and strategy of the department, and he steers, co-ordinates and monitors day-to-day business in the department.

The secretary-general is assisted for the transition to a self-steering network organisation by the so-called advisory group. This is not a management body for decision making. This group is a kind of reflection room that supervises the conditions and all aspects related to the transition. This group is the ambassador of the principles of self-steering and is expected to spread these ideas throughout the organisation. This group also seeks to stimulate collaboration and networking in the organisation.

In addition, special working groups have been set up for specific themes related to the transition of the department to a self-steering organisation. They also develop best practices. All employees in the department are encouraged to participate in one or more working groups. Employees and teams can also start their own working group and give access to the entire department.

The so-called network amplifiers is one of these working groups. The network amplifiers is a large group of supporters. Their supporting role consists of five major tasks: intake for teams that request support, design work methods, share expertise, and pick up and identify signals on the work floor. The transition barometer is the product of this last assignment. It allows us to analyse the appreciation of the innovative work organisation by department employees.

4. A barometer to keep rout finger on the pulse: the transition barometer

4.1. Purpose of the transition barometer

The concept of the barometer consists of surveying all employees in order to gain insight into the support for the transition towards a self-steering network organisation. It is at the same time the ideal opportunity for learning about the requirements/needs/joys of department employees.

We can obviously consult the barometer on a regular basis. As we go forward, we can focus on specific themes depending on the requirements and needs. The survey is designed as a panel where we can monitor (while respecting privacy) the attitudes of employees over time. In this respect it is important that we can monitor the answers of specific individuals over time while respecting their privacy. In this discussion we will look at the baseline measurement of the barometer.

The content of the questionnaire is mainly inspired by similar instruments for measuring the support for transitions and the principles regarding self-steering prepared by the advisory group and launched across the organisation at the end of 2015. The survey is an online survey of all 229 employees of the Department of Public Governance and the Chancellery.

A total of 166 colleagues in the Department of Public Governance and the Chancellery participated in the survey. This means that we can rely on a satisfactory turnout of 72.5%.

This response was linked to the background characteristics of the respondents. This differences depending on the background characteristics of the respondents are limited. This is the case if we consider gender, age, full-time work or not, and the status of the employees (statutory, contractor or traineeship). The only characteristic that shows a difference is the job position in the hierarchy. The higher the position, the more respondents participated.

4.2. What do we learn from the readings on the barometer?

We will now briefly discuss the different sections of the questionnaire and the results of the first survey in the department. The questionnaire contains statements for which respondents can indicate to which extent they agree with the statements. Scores are used on a 5-points scale from 1 (disagree completely) to 5 (agree entirely). An additional answer, "don't know", was also provided.

4.2.1. Attitudes towards the transition in DPGC

We first discuss the attitude towards the actual transition. This discussion is inspired by the change radar which was described as methodology by Wigman (2011). The premise is that the multitude of questions can provide insight into the status of the knowledge, attitude, and behaviour regarding the transition (see COMM, 2015).

We learn that slightly more than half of all respondents know why the transition was introduced

and what the goal of the transition is (respectively 53.6% and 54.2% of employees agree or agree entirely with these two statements). About one fifth gave a neutral answer, while 22.9% either disagree to a greater extent or a lesser extent with these statements.

In addition, we also asked if the respondents were aware of the steps that would be taken to achieve the transition. Slightly more than four out of ten employees say they don't know how this will be done. One third gave a neutral answer, while slightly more than one fifth say they do know the steps to achieve these ambitions.

Two statements concern information regarding the transition. Well over 40% say they received sufficient information about the transition, while 22.3% do not agree. One third is neutral. In addition, 53.0% say they searched for this information about the transition and know where they can find it. 16,9% do not agree with this.

Two statements are specifically about the usefulness of the transition. We specifically asked about the usefulness of the transition for the department and also for his/her daily work. Slightly more than 40% believe the transition is useful for the department; just over a third believe the transition is useful for their own daily activities. One fifth believe the transition is not useful for the department, while one third believe it is not useful for their work.

Besides the feeling of involvement, we also asked about the level of active participation in the transition. Nearly 45% of employees feel they are involved in the transition and contribute actively. Slightly more than one third do not feel they are involved in the transition, while 28.3% say they do not contribute actively to the transition.

Strong mutual dependencies obviously exist between the answers to the various statements about the transition. For example, the degree of involvement in the transition is related to the level of active participation in the transition. In fact, we see that all aspects of the questionnaire regarding the attitude towards the transition are significantly mutually dependent. Moreover, based on a factor analysis/principal component analysis, we see that all statements in the questionnaire essentially measure the same underlying concept.

4.2.2. Working as part of a team

Teams play a central role in the transition of the Department of Public Governance and the Chancellery. For this reason, the roles and tasks granted to teams in the department play a key role in the Transition Barometer.

This reveals that half of all employees agree with the statement that teams are the ideal building blocks for the new department (50.6%). A quarter of them are neutral, while 11.4% do not agree. Slightly more than one tenth have no opinion about this (11.4%).

The survey reveals there is strong support for the idea that employees belong to a permanent team as well as temporary or flexible teams. Just under three-quarters of all employees agree with this statement (74.1%).

In addition, we also asked the respondents whether the teams should be structured in departments. Although the department did not choose to do this, 42.2% of employees thought this was a good idea. 19.3% disagree, while 30.1% neither agree nor disagree. The remaining 13.9% has no opinion about this. This indicates that some people are still attached to the traditional hierarchical structures.

It is clear that self-steering is a key element of the transition. In this respect, 55.4% say that there is sufficient interest in their team to work in a self-steering manner. 17.5% do not agree, while about the same number of people are neutral (17.1%). 9.0% answered "don't know".

The operating principles discuss the different roles that need to be incorporated in the teams. In this respect, the distinction between the different roles is not clear for 38.0% of all employees. It is clear for 30.1% of employees, while just over a quarter gave a neutral answer (24.7%).

4.2.3. The role of the teams

There is relatively little debate about the statement that decisions must first be aligned within the team; this is also the case for vacation planning in the team. Respectively 78.9% and 82.5% agree with these statements. Only 4.8% and 6.6% disagree with these statements.

There is a clear divide with regard to planning and evaluation. While 72.3% believe it's a good idea to let the team prepare the planning, only 37.3% like the idea of staff evaluations being made collectively by the team.

This is mainly for the roles granted to teams for aligning decisions, vacation planning, and the planning of work activities. Support is much lower for decisions regarding career breaks, while staff evaluations by the team receives the least support.

4.2.4. Confidence in the different actors

We subsequently surveyed the level of confidence in the different actors. We can also express the average level of confidence using a score range of 1 (very little confidence) to 5 (a great deal of confidence). It's clear that confidence in team colleagues is the highest (average of 3.89), followed by confidence in other colleagues in the department (3.51). The average scores for confidence in the advisory group and the network amplifiers is more or less neutral (respectively 3.07 en 3.11), while confidence in the transition is just under that neutral score (2.92).

In addition, we can use principal component analysis or factor analysis to find patterns in the assessments of the different actors. In factor analysis we only consider those respondents who answered all questions regarding confidence (65.1% of the total population). Two dimensions can be distinguished in this group. The first underlying dimension is the confidence a person has in the colleagues of the team and the other colleagues. A relatively strong correlation exists between both items (0.446).

The other four variables together constitute a reliable scale (Cronbach's alpha of 0.916). Within the sub-group of 4 variables, a strong correlation of 0.860 exists for confidence in the advisory group and the network amplifiers. We also see a strong correlation between confidence in the secretary-general and confidence in the transition in general (0.746).

4.2.5. Self-steering as binding agent in the new organizational form

The survey also focussed extensively on the attitude towards different aspects of the agreement framework. The principle of self-steering is a key element of the agreement framework. In the first place, the different respondents were asked to which extent the principle of self-steering was clear. We see that it is clear for nearly 60% of employees (57.8%). Nearly one fifth gave a neutral answer and slightly more than one fifth (21.1%) disagree with the statement that the self-steering principle is clear.

This finding must immediately be qualified further with the following statement that surveys the extent to which respondents agree with how the principle of self-steering must be applied. Just over one third state that this is clear for them (34.9%), while around the same number of respondents say it is not clear for them (34.3%). Another 27.1% answered with a neutral score. Respondents were also asked whether the new organisational form improves their personal work situation on the one hand and the Department of Public Governance and the Chancellery in general. We see that 9% have no opinion with regard to their own situation and 18.1% for the department. For this reason we will now discuss the percentages within the group that do have an opinion. Nearly 40% believe it is an improvement for their own work situation (39.7%). This share is slightly higher for the department (42.6%) insofar as it can be measured. About 30% gave a neutral answer for each case, while 29.1% disagree with the statement that it

improves their work situation and 26.5% for the department.

Access to information is the next element. Respondents were asked to which extent they agreed that everyone in the department has access to the all information. Once again we see that a significant number of employees has no opinion about this (13.9%). Of those who did have an opinion, 44.1% disagree with this statement, while 30.1% agree that everyone does have access to all information. This leads us to conclude that transparency is an important focus point.

Self-steering operations lead us closer to a flatter organisation without a hierarchy. However, does everyone like the idea of having no hierarchy in the department.The results reveal that 38.0% of all employees do not agree with this, while a quarter does agree with the statement that the absence of a hierarchy is a good idea. In other words, a significant number of employees are not against a hierarchy, on the contrary.

An important functioning principle in the new organisational form is that, in principle, anyone can take any decision. But are the employees supportive of this idea? Once again we see that a considerable number of employees are not partial to this principle. 44.0% of all employees do not agree with the statement that anyone can make any decision. 27.1% do approve this principle, while 22.3% are neutral.

4.2.6. Net promoter score

The transition barometer also includes the so-called Net Promoter Score which measures the general temperature in the department. This is a simple but powerful instrument that measures customer satisfaction with a single question. For this classic test, we achieved an average of 5.76 on a scale from 0 to 10. This average has a standard deviation of 2.25. From the standard deviation, we can at least conclude that the scores vary strongly.

A distinction is made between three categories of employees based on their score: promoters, passively satisfied employees and critics. Promoters have a score of nine or ten. Passively satisfied employees have a score of seven or eight. Those with a score lower than 7 are referred to as "critics" in their operations. When applied to the scores for the department, the results are 52.4% critics, 42.7% passively satisfied employees and 4.8% promoters. This results in a Net Promoter Score of -47.6%.

4.2.7. Buy-in for the network organization as organizational form

The following questions are about support for the network organisation as organisational form. We asked colleagues to which extent they believed that a network organisation is ideal for tackling the challenges that face the Department of Public Governance and the Chancellery. A significant number of employees could not answer this question, i.e. 27.7% to be precise. Of those who could answer, more than half (53.3%) thought it was a good idea, while 11.7% did not agree. The remaining third was neutral.

In addition, we asked to which extent a self-steering network is considered to be a suitable organisational form for the entire Government of Flanders. Respondents were less enthusiastic about this statement. Of those who can (and want to) reply, more than 40% do not agree, while nearly half do agree (41.3% vs 32.2%). The remaining quarter of respondents who answered give a neutral appreciation. Once again, more than a quarter of all employees answered "don't know" (27.1%).

A last point is the provision of administrative services for the outside world. This is also a good time to ask how the transition will help the department provide services more effectively for its customers. Here we also see that more than a quarter cannot give an answer. The opinions of employees who responded are divided. More than 40% are neutral, 29.5% disagree, while 28.7% agree.

We also asked to which extent the new organisational form will enable the department to

respond with more flexibility to societal changes. 18.1% could not answer this question. Of those who could answer, just under half agree (48.5%). 27.9% are neutral, while just under a quarter disagree (23.5%).

4.2.8. Clarify of the rules and the role of the different actors

The next aspect in the analysis is about the clarity of the role of the different actors in the department and the operating principles. For the overall statement about the working environment and the rules in the department, we found that this is not clear for nearly half of all employees. It is clear for just under one fifth. 19.3% of employees say that it is clear where the responsibilities lie in the department. Slightly more than half of the respondents say that it is not clear where the responsibilities lie in the department. This is definitely an important focus point.

We also asked about the clarity of the role of the different actors, i.e. the advisory group, the network amplifiers, the secretary-general and the different expert groups. Of these four actors, only the secretary-general seems to have a relatively clear role. Almost half of the respondents say that his role is clear, while just over one fifth indicate that this role is not clear (respectively 48.2% vs 22.3%). The roles of the other actors are found not to be clear by proportionally more respondents. For respectively 36.1% and 39.2% of the employees, the roles of the advisory group and network amplifiers are unclear, while they are clear for respectively 30.1% and 26.5%. The ambiguity of the role of the expert groups has the highest score. More specifically, 44.6% say their role is not clear, while 21.1% indicate their role in the department is clear.

And finally we asked about collaborating in processes and in teams. For this aspect we see that process collaboration is not clear for many colleagues (36.1% vs 33.7% for whom it is clear). Respondents are much more familiar with collaborating in projects. This is clear for 46.4%, while it is not clear for 27.1%.

5. Conclusion: is the glass half full or half empty?

By focussing on a self-steering network organisation, the Department of Public Governance and the Chancellery have chosen resolutely for an innovative work organisation. The traditional hierarchy has been replaced by self-steering teams which constitute the cornerstones of the new organisation. The objective of this new organisation is to be able to respond more effectively to societal changes and to the department's role that consists of satisfying societal requirements and needs.

The present paper discusses how employees in the department appreciate this transition. It should be noted that it is difficult to comment on the trends we found, in particular because it is the first time the barometer has been calculated and we do not have a reference point. Moreover, some commentators may be of the opinion that the glasses are half full, while others may focus on the glasses being half empty. However, the following is a cautious attempt to draw a number of conclusions from all the figures.

The first finding is that the response to this survey is very high: 72.5%. In terms of the general attitude, we found that slightly more than half of all respondents know why the transition was introduced and what the goal of the transition is. However, four out of ten say they still don't know how we can achieve these ambitions. We also see that 40% are of the opinion that the transition is useful for the department, while one third believe it's useful for their own work situation. 45% of respondents feel involved in the transition, while one third does not.

There is clearly support for the teams as the ideal building blocks of the organisation. They are also given important roles to play for example in decision-making and planning. However, there is more resistance for staff evaluations by the team. We also found that 40% of employees agree with structuring the teams in departments. On the other hand, 40% indicate that it is not

sufficiently clear to them what roles the teams are expected to play.

In terms of trust, we found that the colleagues in one's own team merit the most confidence, while confidence in other colleagues within the department is also relatively high. Respondents have less confidence in the advisory group and the network amplifiers, while confidence in the transition in general is the lowest. In fact, the findings reveal a divide: nearly a third of all respondents have only a little confidence, while 30% have confidence and the rest is neutral.

Feelings towards the transition depend to a great extent on the perception of transparency. In this respect, it should be noted that nearly 45% do not agree with the statement that information about the transition is accessible for everyone.

The finding that not all employees are enthusiastic about the transition is reflected by the so-called Net Promoter Score. Based on this measurement tool, we have 4.8% promoters, 42.7% passively satisfied employees and 52.4% critics in the organisation.

Just more than half of all respondents support the network organisation as organisational form. However, this must be considered together with the 25% who have no opinion about this. Support for applying this transition to the entire Government of Flanders is significantly lower, while opinions are divided regarding the added value of the transition for the actual services we provide for our customers.

The survey has revealed that a lot of uncertainty exists among employees. This is particularly the case with regard to where the responsibilities lie in the department and the role of the different expert groups, and the working environment and rules in the department. We only have an average score which is higher than the neutral median for clarity of the secretary-general's role and project-based collaboration.

This report does not conclude that the glass is half full or half empty. We leave the conclusion to those who will shape the transition on a daily basis, i.e. all the employees of the Department of Public Governance and the Chancellery. The challenge will be to develop an approach tailored to the needs of individuals in the organisation, within the context of our societal assignment and with respect for the organisation's goals.

Acknowledgments

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