INTER-SECTOR LEADER TRANSITIONS AND ORGANISATION TRANSFORMATION: A RESEARCH AGENDA

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Panel: Contemporary Challenges for Public Sector Human Resource Management

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Inter-sector leader transitions and organisation transformation: a research agenda

Abstract

Faced with the need for strategic change, structural and cultural realignment, innovation and value-adding, many public sector organisations are tapping into a wider senior leadership talent pool and attracting successful leaders from other sectors (Flynn and Thompson, 2009). Leadership renewal has resulted, in some cases, in the external recruitment of whole senior leadership teams (Hockridge, 2008), raising issues about the influence of context on leader success (Pawar and Eastman, 1997) and potential leader transition failure, a costly outcome for leaders and organisations (Howard, 2001).

There is little research on inter-sector leader transitions, which is surprising given the significant costs associated with leader acquisition and failure (Conger, 2010; Day and Halpin, 2004). For example, it is not clear what organizations do (or do not do) to ensure the outcomes of their significant investment in inter-sector transitions are realised. In addition, it is not clear how the individual leader manages the challenging transition into a new leadership context and how their approach to leadership facilitates or inhibits successful transition (Avolio, 2010). Leader assimilation programs have been developed to assimilate new leaders (Manderscheid, 2008); however, assimilation is not necessarily a desired organisational outcome (Denis and Pineault, 2000).

In this paper we critically review the limited literature on inter-sector leader transitions and transformational change outcomes and argue for a mutual accommodation approach. We draw on our own initial empirical work to propose the elements of a program for achieving this outcome from the perspective of the public organisation and the inter-sector appointee.
Inter-sector leader transitions and organisation transformation: a research agenda

INTRODUCTION

Successful public sector reform initiatives rely heavily on organisational leaders who can not only deliver desired organisational performance outcomes but who can also shape the cultural beliefs and values that increase the likelihood that performance outcomes will be sustained (Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalf, 2004). Consequently, public sector organisations invest heavily in developing organisational leadership at all organisational levels. This investment takes two main forms; (1) developing internal leadership capability through succession planning and various forms of leadership development and (2) recruiting successful leaders from other sectors (Denis, Langley and Pineault, 2000; Allio, 2005; Dent, 1992). Much is written in the HR literature about leadership capability development at middle and lower organisational levels of public organisations (Nohria and Khurana, 2010). However, very little attention has been given to understanding the issues associated with developing leadership capability at senior levels, particularly issues related to the recruitment of external senior leadership talent (Denis, Langley and Pineault, 2000). The focus of this paper is on an under-researched aspect of senior leader recruitment; the experience of senior leaders who transition from other sectors into the public sector, a process we refer to as inter-sector senior leader transition. Successful inter-sector senior leader transitions have the potential to make significant contributions to both performance and culture change outcomes; external leaders inject new ways of thinking, new cultural values frequently more consistent with the direction of public sector reform initiatives. Yet, simultaneously, the risks and costs associated with inter-sector transition failure are very high.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the recruitment of senior leaders from outside the public sector is becoming more frequent. In some cases, it is articulated as a desired strategy in government direction. The Australian government’s discussion paper Reform of Australian Government Administration (October 2009) states: ‘While internal recruitment to leadership roles is an effective way of utilizing and rewarding corporate knowledge and experience, and may reflect effective succession planning, insufficient external recruitment risks creating closed and insular organisational cultures’. This demonstrates the direction setting power of the political over the administration arms of public sector. Hartley et al (2002: 391) describe some of the paradoxes of this relationship
‘...encouragement from central government to innovate – but also a firm emphasis on not failing: on the need for local responsiveness and variation to reflect local needs.’ It is somewhat surprising therefore that so little prior HR research informs our understanding of senior leader inter-sector transitions (Denis, Langley and Pineault, 2000); these transitions incur significant costs associated with external recruitment, remuneration costs and the cost of failure (for example, departure of externally recruited leader before they have made a significant contribution) and particularly as, in the private sector context at least, the failure rate of leader assimilations is quite high (Manderscheid, 2008; Manderscheid and Ardichvili, 2008). Compounding the problem, HRM at any level of government is frequently excluded from the process of external recruitment of senior leaders. Consequently, there is less data to inform the development of policies and practices that might well increase the likelihood of realising anticipated outcomes as well as better managing the process of transition.

This research has three key aims (1) determine senior leaders’ experience of inter-sector transition, (2) to consider the implications of this experience for the development of inter-sector leader transition management practice, and (3) to develop a research agenda designed to elaborate theory and practice. We argue that like most transitions, inter-sector senior leader transitions tend to be highly problematic; inter-sector senior leader transitions typically require that the leader manages high levels of discontinuity with less organisational support than that provided to leader transitions at lower levels in the organisation. Furthermore we argue that given the significance of these transitions much more needs to be done at some appropriate level of public sector HRM. Often it appears that the organisational implications of inter-sector transitions is not considered, making it more likely that the transition will achieve much less than expected or possible.

Leadership

Leadership talent is assumed to be a key factor in explaining successful organisational performance and development (Clarke, Butcher and Bailey, 2004). Many public sectors invest heavily in developing leadership capabilities consistent with public sector reform agendas (see for example, the Integrated Leadership System, a capability framework for the senior executive service in the Australian Public Service (2004) or Lominger Leadership Capabilities (1991). Yet the scale of reform raises questions about excessive reliance on internal leadership development as an exclusive source of leadership talent. While the evidence is not yet available, developing the pool of leadership talent
by emphasising internal HR processes such as succession planning and leadership development programs may be insufficient to produce sustainable public sector reform. Internal leaders are typically imbued with the same cultural values and beliefs that the architects of public sector reform often seek to change. Internal leadership development is likely to result in the development of “pockets of excellence,” though not the critical mass of leadership talent required for fundamental change.

Consequently, there is a greater reliance on importing leaders who have demonstrated leadership excellence in other sectors of the economy. Anecdotally, various forms of inter-sector leader transition are being employed: (a) inter-sector transition of an individual leader, (b) inter-sector transition of individual leader with executive assistant support, (c) replacement of the top leadership team by an intact leadership team, and (d) the simultaneous replacement of individual leaders in the top team. None of these strategies has attracted much interest of researchers and each strategy is worthy of much more research however our focus is on the transition of an individual senior leader.

There are potential benefits and costs are associated with inter-sector senior leader transitions: Benefits include (1) outsiders bring new ways of interpreting the issues confronting public organisations; they bring new mental models, (2) new knowledge in domains not traditionally of public administration, (3) they bring new cultural values that support the development of new performance and people management cultures, and (4) they are not necessarily constrained by prior political dynamics and constraints that hinder the identification and implementation of innovative corporate direction and culture. Indeed, the core purpose of inter-sector senior leader transitions is to produce change, not to reinforce pre-existing practices and cultural values. However there are also significant potential costs associated with inter-sector leader transitions:

1. External recruitment of senior leaders is enormously expensive;
2. Role set relationships and organisational relationships generally are often not receptive to ‘outsiders’ (Pawar and Eastman, 1997);
3. Outside executives are not as familiar with the organisation’s structure and the existence of informal networks of information and communication (Watkins, 2003);
4. Outside hires are not familiar with the corporate culture and therefore have greater difficulty assimilating (Watkins, 2003);
5. New people are unknown to the organisation and therefore do not have the same credibility as someone who is promoted within (Watkins, 2003);

6. Anecdotal evidence suggests that senior leaders do not hit the ground running. It can take 2-3 years for new leaders to be “truly assimilated” (Downey, 2002: 70); and

7. There is often an assumption that managers/leaders who have been successful or effective in one sector will necessarily be effective in another; thus there is a tendency to ignore the influence of context on leadership effectiveness.

Inter-sector senior leader transition

The literature on inter-sector leader transitions into the public sector is sparse (for an exception see Denis, Langley and Pineault, 2000). The small amount of research that has been undertaken has focused on transitions between private sector organizations (Downey, 2002). In this section we consider research that might contribute to a better understanding of inter-sector senior leader transitions.

The literature on organisational socialisation suggests that role transitions are often problematic (Ashforth et al 2007; Jones 1986). For example, Blumenthal (1983) in a practitioner paper describes his own experience of shifting from private sector to public sector as like the shock associated with “suddenly moving to a very foreign country”. Van Maanen (1979) describes transitions as “break points;’ changes that thrust one from a state of certainty to uncertainty; from knowing to not knowing; from the familiar to the unfamiliar.” Transitions, then, are characterised by a high degree of discontinuity; the senior leader job environment in one sector is likely to be significantly different from that in another. However, much of the existing work on senior leader transitions in the socialisation literature is anecdotal. There is a need for more empirical research to capture senior leader experience in more depth.

The success of inter-sector leader transitions is likely to be affected by the personal characteristics of the leader. Senior leaders in public administration are assumed to have a common set of core capabilities which enable them to lead change in organisations. This core set is expanded into a capability and behavioural framework developed specifically for senior executives. A typical example
of this is UK civil service Professional Skills for Government (PSG) which describes leadership capabilities:

- Provide direction for the organisation
- Deliver results
- Build capacity for the organisation to address current and future challenges
- Integrity

And core capabilities:

- People management
- Financial management
- Analysis and use of evidence
- Programme and project management.

A further example is the Senior Executive Leadership Capability (SELC) Framework (Australian Public Service Commission 1999) which identifies five core capability clusters:

- Shapes strategic thinking
- Achieves results
- Cultivates productive working relationships
- Exemplifies personal drive and integrity
- Communicates with influence.

Our previous research (Flynn & Thompson, 2010) identified capabilities, behaviours and personal characteristics which are not described in such frameworks which are critical to successful change transition at the chief executive level. (see Table 3: Strategies for adaptation).

The success of inter-sector leader transitions is likely to be affected by organisational receptivity. Pawar and Eastman (1997:90) define organisational receptivity as the “members’ (employees and managers) responsiveness to the transformational leader’s vision and attempts to align organisational members’ self-interests with collective interests”. They argue that organisational receptivity to new leaders is contingent on context. Specifically, organisational receptivity is likely to
be higher when the organisation has (1) an adaptation orientation rather than an efficiency orientation, (2) when boundary spanning as opposed to technical core units is dominant, (3) in Simple and Adhocracy configurations than in Machine Bureaucracy, Professional Bureaucracy or Divisional configurations, and (4) when an organisation has a clan mode of governance than either market or bureaucratic modes of governance. This research suggests that receptivity is likely to be problematic for leaders transitioning into public sector organisations; in a broad sense none of these contingency factors seem to be met in most public organisations. Focusing on senior leaders’ experience provides a means of clarifying the nature of receptivity to inter-sector senior leader transitions.

Related to the previous point, the success of inter-sector leader transitions is also likely to be affected by conflict management norms in the employing organisation (Bartunek, 1993). The very fact that the new leader brings new mindsets, new perspectives and new cultures will inevitably result in ‘inter-cultural’ conflict. The new leader will be surrounded by members of their role set whose beliefs and interpretations may differ significantly from their own. Under these circumstances, conflict is inevitable. Conflict is a potential source of change and development as those involved work through different interpretations of significant organisational issues and achieve, in the best circumstances, a synthesis of inter-sector leader perspective and internal perspective (Van de Ven and Poole 1995; Dent, 1992; Bartunek, 1984). However, not all conflict is functional and without appropriate norms, conflict has the potential to reinforce rather than change pre-existing cultures (Bartunek and Reid, 1993).

Denis, Langley and Pineault (2000) conducted one of the few studies consistent with the focus of this paper. Denis et al studied the entry of a single outsider CEO into a U.K. teaching hospital. They identify four types of leader response; (1) assimilation occurs when the new leader adopts the dominant beliefs of the new organisation, (2) accommodation implies that both the individual and the organisation will adapt their perspectives partially to converge on a new pattern, (3) transformation implies the new leader has succeeded in imposing his or her own conception of the distribution of roles and will have persuaded organisation members to adopt his or her own interpretive scheme, and (4) parallelism implies a persistent divergence between the two trajectories. Denis et al (2000) found different leader responses in different functions of the organisation (medical and administrative) and that the integration process was dynamic in that
response patterns change over time. Denis et al’s work makes an important contribution to the transition literature

Some authors have reported the design of programs to facilitate leader assimilation in private sector organisations (Manderscheid, 2008; Downey, 2002). ‘New Leader Assimilation’ is “a planned leadership development intervention used to help leaders accelerate their adaptation to a new organization and their new team” (Manderscheid, 2008: 686). The intervention focuses on accelerating learning, adaptation and relationship building of the new leader in the new context. However, as discussed earlier, assimilation may not best use the change capabilities of new inter- sector leaders; frequently senior leaders are recruited into the public sector to create change. Downey (2002) also developed a model for assimilating new leaders in private sector organisations. Downey’s model has four stages: Anticipating and planning (pre-entry), entering and exploring (0-6 months), building (6-18 months), and contributing (18 months+). There is still much empirical testing of such programs to be undertaken. Moreover, it is unclear whether such programs would serve inter-sector senior leader transitions into the public sector.

At this point there is insufficient data to support the development of strategies for better managing inter-sector senior leader transitions. We argue that we need better insight into the experience of senior leaders making inter-sector transitions into the public sector. A better understanding of these experiences will provide important data on which policy may be built as well as directions for further research. The key questions guiding our research are:

1. How do senior leaders describe their experience of inter-sector transitions into the public sector and what do these descriptions suggest about the interaction between inter-sector senior leaders and public organisations?

2. What factors explain more successful change as a result of inter-sector senior leader transitions?

3. What do these descriptions suggest about the better management of inter-sector leader transitions?
METHOD

The focus of our research is on senior leader experience of their transition into a public sector organisation. Story and metaphor are commonly used methods for capturing personal experience. The stories told in organizations offer researchers a natural entry point to understanding and clarifying human experience (Boyce, 1996; Brown, 1986; Martin, 1982). In this research, we provide participants with an opportunity to tell the story of their transition into the public sector as the means of addressing our research questions.

Thirteen senior leaders participated in the study, 7 females and 6 males. Seven participants were chief executives, 2 were senior executives and 4 were HR or OD executives. Table 1 shows the distribution of participants involved in the study. By the standards of most empirical studies the sample size is small. However, senior leaders can be difficult to access and we believe that our data does make an initial contribution to an issue that has been given very little attention in the literature. Participants were recruited initially through personal contacts. As we met each participant we asked them to nominate another executive who we might approach to participate. Each participant was contacted and the intent of the research explained. Participation was voluntary and confidentiality and anonymity was guaranteed. The research was governed by appropriate ethics clearance.

Table 1: Interviewee levels, transitions and length of time in role (Flynn & Thompson 2010)

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<th>Level</th>
<th>Transition</th>
<th>Length of time in role</th>
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<td>CE1</td>
<td>Academic to public</td>
<td>Role 1 4 years</td>
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<td>Role 2 2 years</td>
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<td>Role 3 2 years</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Role 4 4 years (ongoing)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE2</td>
<td>Academic to public</td>
<td>Role 1 5 years</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Role 2 3 years</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Role 3 2 years</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Role 4 2 years (ongoing)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE3</td>
<td>Public to public (new jurisdiction)</td>
<td>Role 1 3 years</td>
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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question 1 asked: How do senior leaders describe their experience of inter-sector transitions into the public sector and what do these descriptions suggest about the interaction between inter-sector senior leaders and public organisations? Participants in the study provided rich narratives of their transitioning experience. Space restrictions limit the degree to which these narratives can be reported. Consequently we have had to be selective in our reporting of these narratives without compromising the essential elements that highlight the inter-sector transitioning
experience. As a result we have been more generous with quotations than is usual in qualitative research.

CE1 Case

CE1 made the transition from a senior position in academia to a senior public management position, though not initially at CE level. He had a background in public policy and was "headhunted" into the public sector to contribute public policy expertise at a time when the public sector was seeking to introduce innovation and change. CE1 reported limited induction and orientation into the public sector:

There was no facilitation of transition into the public sector apart from a briefing on document pro formas and a briefing on administrivia. I did not have a mentor – though I didn’t know what I didn’t know. At that point I had no foresight to know what questions to ask.

CE1 found the first twelve months extremely difficult as he learned to manage the contradiction between his preferred collaborative management approach and that dictated by the public sector tradition. CE1 had to learn the rules of the game the hard way. CE1’s survival strategy was to learn the expectations of senior political and managerial leaders, often through trial and error, roll with some very heavy punches and analyse his way through the difficult "small-p" political relationships. He found that there was little opportunity or permission to think innovatively:

I was struck by two things when I joined. Firstly, the differentials and deference in the hierarchical relationships of the public sector. In the university setting I was used to more horizontal and collegiate relationships – this was a big cultural shift. And (secondly) the detailed and intense processes for moving paper around and no way to short cut it. I felt trapped by this – the task was to "correct and flick on" – to push information into the system.

CE1 reported that when he joined the public sector it was going through a period of major change following a change of government:

(My transition) was made murkier by change and reviews going on. There was an overall sense of uncertainty and instability. There was a lot of job insecurity. I was quite sympathetic with the junior staff who had no access to information about what was going on. (During this time) I felt a victim of change – I felt very uncomfortable in my first year. (This discomfort
was exacerbated by being led to believe that some of the people working with me were linked to the previous government. I was quietly told not to trust the people working for me.

CE1 reported a change management experience (as noted above, change dominated his early experience in the public sector): His initial experience, in contrast to that in the academic sector, was that change management was characterised by exclusion, being secretive – despite initial espoused sanction to consult:

>The first draft of our organisational review became available and I was told that it was appropriate for internal consultation to take place. I took this seriously and passed copies to people in the department. Two days later I was told it was a misunderstanding. I was now told it wasn’t for internal consultation – that it would be inflammatory ….. If I’d had better networks I would not have made that mistake. So I got mixed messages. Two faced nature of organisational change – the top down way and bringing people along – there is an inherent tension. I didn’t have the authority to be a good change manager.

For this manager, relationships with the ministerial office were also governed by rules that restricted access and being able to incorporate this ministerial perspective into managerial decision making:

>Another issue was the need to develop a relationship with the ministerial office – though this was protected and restricted turf, and there was an effort to stop me from doing this. The effect, however, was a lack of direct knowledge of the thinking in the ministerial office. So my interactions with the ministerial office tended to be brief and crisis driven.

**CE2 Case**

The task given to CE2 by his Minister was to fix the strategy problem by buying the problem. This entailed a technical, rational direction, when his real task was to shift culture, an adaptive, non-rational exercise. He was to work with industry to show them how to succeed in the context. His background was that of an academic and lobbyist in his field. His experience of the transition was almost visceral:

>I felt at sea –seasick with a rolling, meandering, disorienting feeling. When I got to my first job in (place deleted), a comer office, it was “here is your desk, here is your job, get on with it”. I was left alone for two days before anyone came near me. There was a complete absence of assistance with enculturation and induction. In the [organisational name], the
Director-General played a role – he was my mentor – by that I mean someone who stages your development for you by their belief in you and looking out for you.

CE2’s experience of relationships with the ministerial level was similar to that of CE1. CE2 states: Ministers have a lot more influence down into the public service organizations. There is little separation between their role and that of the Chief Executives, which is confusing and difficult to work with (Thompson & Flynn 2009). CE2 indicated that he worked with the shadow systems (Shaw, 1997) as well as the visible systems of the organization. For CE2, pre-existing public management is fearful of the new management ideologies:

In the public sector I found a complete dichotomy, more than that, a complete contradiction between what is espoused and what is practiced. Anyone who leads from ‘below the green line’ is unusual and seen as a threat. The Minister and most senior public servants all work ‘above the green line’ and are terrified of the ideas espoused by Wheatley, Rogers, Ed Schein etc [a reference to leadership program still being offered and opening up these questions about the intangible and, to some extent, uncontrollable elements of organisation: culture, relationships, behaviours, values and identity]

CE2’s experience of the work environment was also similar to that of CE1:

I had an isolating experience. They appointed a person to be my 2IC (second-in-charge) who undid all that I put in place. He came from a command and control PS culture. Staff experienced compliant diversity and dominant strictures. He isolated me from those above and below me. He undermined my directions: “(Participant) said do this ... now my (2IC) view is that we will do ....”. I was dependent on those who worked for me. I was set up for failure by someone who wanted my job and succeeded in marginalizing me. He underestimated my career profile. The overall PS culture is one of compliance; bullies prevail.

For CE2, there is still frustration related to form rather than substance:

I feel there is disdain for the reports done – they are done to satisfy the process. Public sector succeeds in what’s expected. I would not have read 90% of the reports that come across my desk. Most of the stuff is just that – stuff! We put it together for policy but it has no real impact. It does not get to the point of management. It is junk. I am very “American” in my perception of the public service. I hate the word bureaucracy and tend to ignore it.
CE3 case

CE3’s inter-sector transitioning experience reinforced that of CE1 and CE2; separation of ministerial and management roles, too many rules and regulations, too much red tape and too many contradictory or mixed messages.

I suppose the tough bit was working with the other executives particularly on things like policy and corporate services - finance, procurement, HR etc where there are so many rules and regulations. Some of these seem contradictory and they all make a lot of work and take a lot of time.

CE3’s experience of performance management highlights one of the challenges of public service – the freedom to “hire and fire”.

In the PS I have to keep trying to make this difficult relationship work which means that this person appears get their own way and in doing so damages a lot of the people along the way. Public sector does not know how to deal with this type of situation. There are a lot of rules about performance management, bullying etc which can be interpreted in many ways. They impact a CE’s ability to take tough decision like this.

CE4 Case

CE4 described himself as having a reputation for delivering results, having been the Chief Executive of four different public sector organizations over ten years. He held senior leadership roles under two different political parties and three State Premiers, one of whom gave him a clear mandate to effect change in whatever way he chose. CE4 came from a non-engineering background to lead a commercially based public sector engineering organization. He came to the role and was very lonely for the first six weeks. He was viewed with distrust as he challenged the technical core and broadened the vision through his change strategy (Waterhouse et al 2002). He did not seek to be embedded in the existing culture. Nevertheless, when the political leadership asked him to lead change in another organization after less than two years, his leaving was viewed as a loss by a large percentage of the organization. Positive results were being experienced from his change leadership.

For him, it was simply about moving on.
CE4 approached organizations in the same way as CE3, with a focus on authentic relationships. His reflection led him to develop the Three Frames approach to corporate and cultural change. Brown et al (2003) describe the Three Frames as the promotion of a cultural shift away from hierarchical and control oriented management and communication towards the adoption of a horizontal, networked structure and open and two-way communication.

CE5 Case

CE5 states your past gives you credibility. In moving from one organization to the same type of organization in another jurisdiction, he described the experience of being given no clear brief on taking up the role but following up with the question: Did I need it? He described having done everything needed to meet the benchmarks for the previous six years in his role and described his experience as ‘lucky’ as he left every organization on top and without scandal – his integrity remains intact and his national reputation as a leader in the field remains intact. He believes the new organization was excited about me coming. His known reputation for successful change experience supported his transition. He was recruited to the role following a major problem and for him, the best thing is to follow a disaster when everyone in the organization feels the wind of change and needs a leader to follow. He found different political persuasions driving opposing approaches to change. His focus is on building confidence in the system by discovering what is best for the organization and where it lies. His subordinates had been involved for significant time in the renovation of systems, some of which were successful and he knew when to leave it alone, but there are central driving processes that are broken and don’t drive the system. He notes the importance of political mandates that can protect the activities of change managers: he is dear about how much risk I am prepared to take myself without political coverage.

CE6 Case

In 2003 an Australian state government introduced a Shared Services initiative, defined as an organizational model in which administrative or ‘back office’ support functions from across various departments or agencies are consolidated into a single stand alone unit (Queensland Government Report 2007). This would require the transformation of processes, organizational structure, technology and culture. CE6 (2008) found himself directed by Ministers to implement a specific model for the new shared services agency but with no mandate for innovative approaches to change management. As the leader he was expected to show strategic change management skills and the
ability to adapt to changing circumstances, however, as a professional economist responding to an organizational change designed by the Treasury department he was limited in his ability to create real change which lasted. More importantly, as a public servant, he was expected to implement the policy decision of the government of the day. This highlights a limitation in how far a senior change leader in the public sector may go. He stated that (our) credibility is shot to pieces, as the expected financial savings to government had not been made and that therefore the initiative was being viewed as failure. His coping strategy was to disassociate emotionally from the failure and to continue to deliver within the established parameters.

**SM1 Case**

SM1, a female senior manager, made the transition from local government into the public sector. The transition was not facilitated and nor was she supported by her new role set:

> There was no induction either to the public sector or the organisation for senior executives. If you are from another jurisdiction you have to know the specific question to ask because you are aware that there will be a process or system or something. Assuming it is the same as where you came from is a danger. If you ask the question you will get a direct response to the question but not all the details and checks of the process. Getting taken very seriously has been difficult as I am very quiet which means I do not like to put myself or my views out there. People underestimated my strength of purpose. Managing people is pretty much the same everywhere – if I am clear on the direction I am taking, I take them with me. I am fairly stubborn.

SM1 reinforced previous participants’ view that the relational environment is characterised by mixed messages and passive-aggressive conflict norms:

> When I joined the public sector I wanted to purchase something fairly expensive. I asked one of my senior staff about the process and was told that the Chief Executive would sign off for me ... so I did the paperwork, and went and knocked on his door to take it to him, which is what I would have done in the local government. I was sent away to go through the appropriate steps, and get the checks in place (Finance Branch, Procurement Branch) before he would sign it. Ultimately, what I had been told was right – he would sign finally, but it was what I wasn’t told that made me look inexperienced. It was a rapid learning experience for me. People would watch me go off and do something with a “she’ll find out” attitude.
For SM1, there were clear differences between her former organisation and the employing public organisation:

*There is a lot more freedom to decide and act in local government. There is also more delegating down ... Important decisions are made lower down in (name deleted) than in the public sector where there is a tendency to push tough decisions up.*

*More rules, more risk averse which means staff further down push tough decisions up the line. Bureaucratic!*

*The relationship with ministers and the government is a tricky one – where do they draw the line?*

*There are some good people working across the service. There are also some in senior roles you cannot trust who seek to hurt and destroy you.*

**SM3 case**

For SM3, the transition to a senior management role was also difficult. She felt her prior experience was devalued and that the environment was hostile to her successful entry:

*I was naive and did not expect it to be too different. I found that the public sector here viewed (organisation name deleted) as 'Hicksville'. They have disdain for it and believe that it does not do anything of significance. The public sector is not welcoming to newcomers, particularly at higher levels. People did not involve me in what was happening. They did not share their networks. I had to establish my own networks. You have to work it out for yourself. If you get the senior job you should know how to do the job from day one. You should be aware of every nuance. This is because you have usually beaten someone who is a long-serving public servant.*

By way of analysis, our data on senior leaders’ experience of inter-sector transitions give rise to five key and inter-related conclusions. First, inter-sector senior leader transitions are highly emotion-charged for the senior leader; it is more like an inter-cultural experience than seamless context-shifting. Second, organisational receptivity (Pawar and Eastman, 1997) tends to be low; senior leader role sets tend not to be responsive to or support the agendas of inter-sector senior leaders. Third, conflict management norms (Bartunek, 1993) in the public sector organisations included in the sample appear not to be supportive of open challenging and testing of pre-existing practices and
cultural values; there is a tendency toward employing mixed and contradictory messages and passive-aggression in the face of new perspectives. In this situation, there will be a tendency for the pre-existing practices and cultures to be reinforced, rather than changed. Fourth, there are strong forces towards assimilation of the new leader as opposed to accommodation (Denis, Langley and Pineault, 2000); despite espoused views, senior leaders were expected to fit in rather than produce fundamental change. In the public sector context, assimilation seems inconsistent with the fundamental aim of recruiting excellent leaders from other sectors and a waste of talent. Fifth, it is noteworthy that in each case, reported discretion to effect change was low, despite the very senior levels at which our participants worked.

Underlying these key themes, we argue, are cultural assumptions about the nature of relationships and power (Schein, 2004). The data reported here suggest that relationships up, down and across the organisation tend to impede leadership and change. Relationships were constrained by hierarchy and deference, language, and cross-functional power differences. Moreover, levels of trust, so important for collective action, were reported to be generally low. Cultural beliefs around power distribution are likely to be the most difficult to influence, particularly by outsiders (though see Ashburner et al 1996). This is not to suggest that this issue is not also reflected in managing in other sectors. However, the fact that these participants experienced relationships and the issue of power and its distribution more intensely suggests that its scale may be greater in the public sector.

Moreover, these differences constrained their ability to challenge the prevailing management culture.

Research question 2 sought to identify factors that explain more successful change as a result of inter-sector senior leader transitions. Senior leaders are typically recruited to produce change, both at the level of organisational performance and at the level of cultural values and beliefs; they are typically not recruited to reinforce pre-existing practices and culture. Our research focused on identifying those factors that contributed to successful change outcomes. An analysis of the complete data set from the structured interview process has identified seven themes related to successful senior change leadership:

**Table 2: Seven themes of successful senior change leadership**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 1</th>
<th>Mandate to undertake change, broad scope of discretion and support from superiors (e.g. Ministers)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 2</th>
<th>Previous successful change leadership experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme 3</td>
<td>An understanding of the socialization tactics of organizations, and the role of culture in assisting or creating obstacles to change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 4</td>
<td>Identity with a profession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 5</td>
<td>Transition to the change role and adaptation strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 6</td>
<td>Self-efficacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 7</td>
<td>Independence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Mandate for change, and support from superiors (e.g. Ministers)

Among those we interviewed, senior leaders with a clear mandate to create change and Ministerial support to do so were most likely to make change occur. The Case Studies describe situations where this had, or had not, occurred. CE4, in particular, provides a good illustration of this dynamic; the support he had from the ministerial level facilitated significant and fundamental change in his organisation. On the other hand, CE2’s capacity to produce change was thwarted by less support from above to deal with active resistance from the next level down.

2. Previous change experience

A history of having led successful organizational change was a repeated theme underlying why someone had been asked to step into a change role (see Table 1). The more often an interviewee had led successful change, the more likely it appears they were given greater discretion to act. Our research also showed that experienced Chief Executives, i.e. those who had performed in a similar role more than once, had developed frameworks for how they approached the new role and a strong sense of themselves as confident individuals in the change leadership role. While many change frameworks exist in the literature (e.g. Kotter, 1999), these change leaders tended to develop their own. CE2, CE4 and CE5 provide particularly powerful illustration of this approach.
3. Organizational socialization and the role of culture

Senior leaders were more successful realising change outcomes when they recognised the need for continuity as well as change. This need for continuity in the context of pressure for change highlights the dilemma for newcomers at senior leadership levels of organizations as they experience the transition to their new role. The change leader needs to discern the systems and behaviors underpinning organizational socialization in the organization they are about to change, to pay attention to the presenting internal and social dynamics, to the intricate playing field between leaders and follower (Kets de Vries, 2004). Working with these systems and behaviours, making them visible and discussable, contributes to successful change (Pedersen and Hartley, 2008; Shaw, 1997; Stacey, 1996).

4. Identity with a profession

An emerging theme revolves around the professional elite, those specialized professional functional roles such as finance or engineering most often found in Treasury, public infrastructure, health and human service agencies. SM 3 describes the experience of leading change in a professional organization and the belief by senior and middle managers within the prevailing professional culture that they could lead the change without her assistance because they were engineers and they understood all aspects of organizational change by osmosis...there was no need to develop an understanding of it. This misplaced confidence led to greater problems.

This raises a new question of whether a senior change leader anchored in a professional elite is able to lead broader organizational change. It appears there is a requirement to move beyond their professional identity ('I am a doctor' or 'I am an engineer') to an identity as the leader of the organization, not just of the profession. CES had led change in the same type of organization with the same culture (paramilitary) in a different jurisdiction. It appears that, through his previous reputation, he gained tacit support from the new organization to lead the change.
5. Transition to the change role

We find that the experience of the transition period is fundamental to the chance of success in the change role. Our research shows that the transition to a senior change role needs to be considered in conjunction with the effects of organizational socialization and the capabilities of the individual concerned to withstand entrapment by the existing culture (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Most interviewees found that peers in the new organization treated them with suspicion and felt threatened. The attitude was one of *wait him/her out and he/she’ll be gone soon*. Most were told by staff they had been searched on the internet. The paradox with this aspect of transition lies in the need for the change leader to work with the existing culture and its social dynamics to achieve significant and lasting change.

6. Self Efficacy

An emerging element in our research is the importance of senior leader self-efficacy, which Jones (1986) argues ‘may moderate the effects of socialization tactics on role orientation’. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) describe the varied aspects of the self as leader which are encapsulated in this term: *self-knowledge, self-definition, self-protection and self-reflection*. The Australian Public Service Commission (2006), in describing the necessary capabilities of a senior executive leader, suggests that the individual should *display resilience*, one element of which is to *monitor own emotional reactions and respond to pressure in a controlled manner...displays a positive outlook in difficult situations*. Self efficacy is reflected in inter-sector leaders’ belief in their own capacity persist and to overcome obstacles.

For CE4, a key question was: *Who to trust?* He chose to *remove treacherous people* by giving the individuals three months to decide if they would align with his vision and direction, and expectations of behaviour. If not, he removed them from the organization. He disclosed his intolerance of senior public servants *ratting on other public servants* – a reference to the recent trend in some public sector agencies to report any perceived misdemeanour to a statutory investigative authority. CE4 is working on the concept of *presencing as a leader*. When asked to explain the phrase he describes being *contemplative in action*, a reference to a strict regime of self reflection.
CE5 states that experience allows (you) to smell out the rat early on and remove them from a sensitive role. The key value at stake here is trust, rather than skills-based capability or mutual liking. In fact CE5 describes appointing a senior executive with whom he had previously had some difficulties, *because she was the best person for the role*. He also advocates a realistic or even ‘cynical’ attitude to the business of change – *to not be overly optimistic*. CE5 describes his leadership frame as *clinical, disciplined and calm*. CE5 described his capacity for self-reflection – with a detached attitude about himself and an admission that he learned this from working with ‘*powerful women*’, which is unusual as he works in a historically male-dominated and hierarchical system.

7. Independence

All the Chief Executives interviewed were substantially independent of the culture of the organization they were to seeking to change. Entrapment, that is to say being captured by the culture, was a risk they were aware of and consciously avoided. The social dynamic attraction of culture can capture some change agents. Once captured and aligned with the existing culture, it is difficult to effect change. The change leaders interviewed all had a history of not being in the change leadership role longer than five years, which aligns with our finding that boredom and staleness can influence them to search for a new challenge. CE5 states *no-one should be there longer than six years*.

As a result of our analysis of inter-sector senior leaders’ change experiences, we have developed a two dimensional model for thinking about dealing with transition into a senior change leadership role (Table 2). The model begins to describe the change leadership role and the relationships between the organizational and the individual perspective of role and the related adaptive strategies identified through our research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3: Strategies for Adaptation – the Relationship between Role and Adaptive Strategies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Role</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Organisation perspective</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Withstand socialization tactics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scope of discretion</td>
<td>Tests the limits of discretion through influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Driven</td>
<td>Fixes problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reputation for change leadership</td>
<td>Self confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Proven in role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous experience</td>
<td>Success driven; alert to personal and organisational risks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Solution focused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knows the context</td>
<td>Seeks &amp; creates support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(uses a mentor or coach)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision &amp; direction</td>
<td>Innovative, intuitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System leadership &amp; change</td>
<td>Professional expertise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Macdonald et al, 2006)</td>
<td>Leads whole of organisation systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Understands interrelatedness of systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manages risk</td>
<td>Open to inquiry, intuitive &amp; learned sensing of risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explores the system</td>
<td>Moves beyond professional identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual perspective</td>
<td>Open to learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understands organisational theory</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Uses or develops models for change</td>
<td>Confidence in own ability &amp; intuition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controls emotional responses</td>
<td>Develops self efficacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Builds alliances &amp; networks</td>
<td>Builds trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultivates sponsorship &amp; support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manages and works with resistance</td>
<td>Ability to work with ambiguity</td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recognises capability of self</td>
<td>Knows self – self honesty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Knows own areas of strength and weakness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seeks to fill capability gaps</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Independent of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognises &amp; develops capability of others</td>
<td>Robust sense of self enables others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognises threat</td>
<td>Removes or neutralises threat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is success driven</td>
<td>Resilient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflective</td>
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Our third research question addresses the issue of the implications of our findings for the better management of inter-sector leader transitions? Inter-sector senior leader transitions can be viewed from at least two perspectives. First, inter-sector senior leader transitions should be unmanaged; the transition provides the senior leader with the opportunity to prove their capabilities, particularly their ability to adapt to new situations. This might be labelled “being put in the line of fire” perspective. If they can succeed under these conditions, it is more likely, the argument might go, they will be effective leaders in the public sector. If they do not succeed or do not stay, they are assumed to be ineffective leaders. The second perspective suggests the process of inter-sector senior leader transitions should be managed, by both informal and formal processes designed by HR by the organisations (for example, by professionals who are expert in role transitions and who are external to the employing organisation). On the basis of the data we have reported here, we argue that the risks and costs of lack of management of the process are too great, both for the senior leader and for the employing organisation: If public organisations are to get the best value from highly talented leaders from other sectors they need to do more to facilitate their transition. The nature of this facilitation has yet to be determined however.
CONCLUSION

This research has addressed an under-researched issue in the public HRM literature: the experience of senior leaders making inter-sector transitions. The concept of a leadership elite able to move seamlessly among sectors may be an ideal though it is not a reality, at least not with the current state of programs designed to facilitate such transitions. Our research has explicated the experience of senior managers involved in inter-sector transitions. This experience suggests that cultural assumptions about relationships and power distribution explain the problematic nature of inter-sector transitions at senior leader level. Second, we have proposed a set of factors that explain the level of successful change achieved by senior leaders in our sample. Finally, we have developed a two-dimensional model for thinking about dealing with the transition into senior leader change role in the public sector. We accept that the limitations of our study put restrictions on the confidence we can place in our conclusions. Nevertheless, our research has produced data that does give useful insight into inter-sector senior leader transitions.

Our research suggests that inter-sector leader transitions is a fruitful area for further research and for the design and testing of programs designed to facilitate the transition of senior leaders into the public sector to enhance the likelihood of achieving targeted outcomes. For example, we see a need to better understand the relationship between transitioning leader and their role set in the employing organisation. These relationships play a significant role in the quality of the transition. Reports of changes to whole management teams appear to illustrate the difficult of managing these relationships. The concept of organisational receptivity may be useful for extending this area of research. Second, we see a need for more research on senior leader capabilities, not just to facilitate task and performance outcomes but also to address the so-called “shadow side” of organisational life.
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