

Implementing Change: A Transformational Leadership Framework

Applied to the Canadian Public Service

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Executive Summary

Applied to the Canadian public service for the first time, this paper explores a new transformational leadership framework that makes connections between the government context, the behaviours and actions of transformational leaders, and how these play out and affect the attitudes and beliefs of employees. This paper argues that a transformational leadership framework is relevant to the Canadian public service as a strategy to implement change and identifies considerations and recommendations for future initiatives.

Introduction

Public sector reform has been at the forefront of public service organizations for decades, as governments have been increasingly called upon to make their practices more efficient. While there have been numerous discussions on the content of public sector reform, there is insufficient knowledge on ‘*how*’ to implement change. There is a growing body of research in public sector reform on transformational leadership – the behaviour and actions of middle managers and their impact on employees’ commitment to change. This paper will explain the transformational leadership framework and apply it to the Canadian public service, exploring its relevancy within the context of the Canadian public service today. Ultimately, this paper identifies considerations for applying this approach and offers recommendations for future initiatives.

Transformational Leadership Framework

Van der Voet, Kuipers, and Groeneveld (2016), public administration theorists in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, developed a framework that explains how change is implemented within public service organizations. Central to their framework is that transformational leadership is achieved “by articulating a vision, fostering the acceptance of group goals, and providing individualized support, [it is at this point that] effective leaders change the basic values, beliefs and attitudes of followers” (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Bommer, 1996, p.260). The framework makes the connection between transformational leaders (middle managers), their behaviours and actions, and how these play out and affect the attitudes and beliefs of employees.

In the framework, transformational leadership behaviour is impacted by a number of factors – a multifaceted environment, structural barriers (rules and regulations), and planned and emergent approaches to change that have an impact on communication to, and the engagement of, employees. The ultimate goal of transformational leadership is employees’ acceptance of change, or their “desire to provide support for the change based on [their] belief in its inherent benefits” (Van der Voet et al., 2016, p.844). This paper explores the transformational leadership framework within the context of the Canadian public service to determine its relevancy and highlight unique Canadian considerations.

Transformational Leadership Framework Applied to the Canadian Public Service

Multifaceted Environment

Transformational leadership behaviour is said to be triggered in a multifaceted environment where middle managers are stimulated to be creative, flexible and innovative in their leadership styles.

It certainly true that the Canadian public service operates within a complex environment. In his 2015 report, *Canada's Public Service and the New Global Normal of Change*, former Clerk of the Privy Council, Kevin Lynch, explains six environmental complexities of the Canada public service today: the global economy, characterized by risks and uncertainty; global governance and gaps; demographics, where age has an impact on government's response to health care and other services; the need to balance the demands of the energy sector versus climate change; disruptive technology in relation to the availability of skilled labour; and the overall impact of globalization within the interconnected world of social media.

Rules and Regulations

In contrast, a high degree of 'formalization', i.e., an abundance of rules and regulations, is considered to reduce transformational leadership behaviour because there is a need for middle managers to focus on the organization's policies and procedures (Van der Voet et al., 2016). In their 2014 report, the Public Policy Forum addresses existing bureaucratic structures in the Canadian public service and advises transitioning to a "flat, flexible and forward thinking public service" (p. 42). However, policy documents and procedures remain highly formalized. Take for example the regulation of routine business during the 2015 election with the implementation of the Government of Canada's 2015 *Guidelines on the Conduct of Ministers, Ministers of State, Exempt Staff and Public Servants During an Election*. This document heavily regulated employee's actions. Post-election, the Prime Minister's Advisory Committee on the Public Service in its Tenth Annual Report (March 2016) again discusses the need to remove structural barriers.

Planned and Emergent Approaches - Fostering Communication to, and Engagement with, Employees

Transformational leadership is said to influence employees' commitment to change through the choice of either planned (top-down) approaches, such as managerial vision statements relayed down to employees, or emergent (bottom-up) approaches, such as organizational change initiatives conceived and led by the employees most impacted. In the transformational framework, emergent change approaches are considered more effective because they include the desired communication to, and participation with, employees (Van der Voet et al., 2016).

Looking at recent Canadian government practices and initiatives, there still seems to be an emphasis on planned approaches to change. A case in point is the Government of Canada's 2016 *Federal Public Service Workplace Mental Health Strategy*. Deputy Heads are to deliver

their vision for improving and creating a more respectful workplace with an emphasis on engagement with all employees to achieve *their* planned vision. The Clerk of Privy Council's Twenty-third Annual Report to the Prime Minister on the Public Service of Canada advocates for an "institutionalized" approach to implementing change (Privy Council Office, 2016, Annex B, para. 13). However, rather than further entrenching existing top-down approaches, institutionalizing emergent approaches created by employees, for employees, and carried out by employees would be more effective for implementing public service reform.

Considerations

The transformational leadership framework describes public service organizations operating within a complex environment burdened by heavy rules and regulations. Applied to the Canadian public service, there are similarities: middle managers are being *pushed* into innovative and agile behavioural styles, largely triggered by their multifaceted environment, but at the same time are being *pulled* down by rules and regulations. For example, at the 2016 National Manager's Committee Meeting, it was discussed that middle managers are caught in the 'frozen middle', as they are too busy addressing operational requirements to reflect on transformational leadership behaviours.

The Prime Minister's Advisory Committee on the Public Service in its Eighth Annual Report (March 2014) discusses recommendations for middle managers, and advises to "put the right management structures in place to support their leadership and enable their maximum contribution in implementing change" (p.13). But what are the right structures? For now, we know that the structures themselves are the problem. And, as the Prime Minister's Tenth Report (March 2016) identifies, these structures are impacting the mental health of all employees - middle managers and front line workers. Indeed, as the Public Policy Forum acknowledged in their 2015 report, *Agile Government Responding to Citizens' Changing Needs*, "there are barriers that exist, providing challenges to government leaders as they seek to be agile" (Public Policy Forum, 2015, p.15).

A consideration for the Canadian public service is to take a closer look at the *push* and *pull* effect on middle managers and target solutions to address this incongruence. Mapping out the demands of the external environment against the barriers within the internal system will help identify areas of improvement. Take for example media's criticism that the government is slow to respond to enquiries. While the government's 2016 *Policy on Communications and Federal Identity* states an expectation for "[g]overnment communications products and activities [to be] timely and accurate", extensive delays arise due to heavy layers of approvals. A solution is to map out the demands of the external environment and align these with the internal structures. An example is to reduce layers of approval, streamline these where possible, and if media enquires do not impact policy, delegate these to middle managers or regional heads.

We know from the transformational leadership framework that emergent approaches are more effective in fostering employees' commitment to change, and that successful efforts are achieved through "reinterpretation and reframing" of values (Van der Voet et al., 2014, p. 171). While we have seen policy moving in the right direction towards more emergent processes, with

communication to and participation of employees, I would suggest that through effective transformational leadership, these practices should be more prevalent in the workplace. Ideally, the Canadian public sector could implement a model of change that considers the reframing of the culture within the workplace. For example, as applied to the Government of Canada's current mental health initiative, include bottom up practices that allow employees to define, create, and implement *their* own mental health initiatives.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that, applied to the Canadian public service, a transformational leadership framework is relevant in implementing change. Consideration are to find congruence within the context of transformation leadership, and to adopt more emergent approaches, 'institutionalizing' these as regular practices for all employees. Finally, there is a dearth of knowledge on actual implementation strategies for public sector reform, particularly within the Canadian public service, and this provides a direction for future research initiatives.

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