Vertical and Horizontal Working: the role of employee relations in whole of government activity

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the development of Whole of Government (WG) working which has emerged, in part, as a response to dysfunctions created by changes to management practices and the employee relations during the New Public Management (NPM) era in Australia. We draw on preliminary case data to demonstrate that policies and practices which reconfigured the employment relationship during the NPM era to enable more flexibility have resulted in considerable barriers to cross-agency working, a critical feature of effective WG operations. We point to several key themes which have emerged as problematic in attempts at operationalising WG: delegation of employer status; vertical and programmatic management focus; reward and incentive structures; lack of shared outcomes; and lack of re-configuration. To address these tensions we make some suggestions on reconfiguring employee relations and organisational deployments which would better support WG practices.

INTRODUCTION

Reform over the last two decades has resulted in profound reconfigurations employee relations in the Australian Public Service (APS). Whole of Government (WG) approaches are a recent development in public sector practice and are intended to promote inter-agency collaboration and cooperation in the pursuit of government policy goals (Ling, 2002). With a focus on connecting across government, the most ambitious objective is to replace the dominance of the chain of command within functional silos with a combination of vertical and horizontal arrangements. This approach has been adopted in other Anglophone systems: United Kingdom (joined up government), Canada (horizontal government), the United States (networked government) and New Zealand (integrated government) (Bogdanor, 2005; Halligan, 2007; Kamarack, 2004).

In the Australian context two central agencies at the Commonwealth have led the charge – Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Australian Public Service Commission, and the previous government saw WG approaches as a means of addressing a range of critical policy problems (Howard, 2002; Kelly, 2006; MAC, 2004). The election of the Rudd government has spurred this on, especially with recent discussions about the use of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) as a way of connecting and collaborating across jurisdictions (Australia 2020, 2008). The push toward WG approaches reflects several interrelated pressures including a response to the disaggregation and fragmentation of the public service which occurred under NPM, promoting integrated or seamless service delivery for citizens, a focus on addressing complex policy issues, including 'wicked problems, improving efficiency and effectiveness' (APSC, 2007; Rittel and Webber, 1973; Pollitt, 2003).

The aim of this paper is to consider how the current configuration of the employment relationship is impacting upon the development of effective WG. Our interest is inspired, in part, by the notion of points of tension which emerge between culture, processes and structure in organisations (Hood, 1996). This is especially relevant in a situation where the operationalisation of WG is so highly dependent on people. In the paper we outline the trajectory of reform which has led to the WG focus. Case based data is then used to consider what issues are currently identified as

enabling and inhibiting effective WG practice and then to discuss what might need to change, in terms of employee relations, if WG is to be more successful.

NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

Since the 1980s, the administrative reform agenda of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries has been largely influenced by the concept of NPM (Cole and Jones, 2005; Maesschalck, 2004), which is based on the language of managerial and economic rhetoric from the private sector (Robbins, 2007). Despite the differences that exist between government and business (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992), through the 1980s and 1990s many governments sought to integrate practices commonly used in the private sector in a quest to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of government. The ideas associated with NPM are generally critical of traditional approaches to bureaucratic administration, which are viewed as unnecessarily rigid and stagnant (Bradley and Parker, 2006), bloated, wasteful and ineffective; and no longer viable in the rapidly changing, information-rich, knowledge-intensive society and economy of contemporary society (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992). A key strand of NPM then has been on improving the performance of public agencies (Vigoda-Gadoti and Meiri, 2008).

Commonly, NPM strategies have an emphasis on efficiency, effectiveness, quality, flexibility and responsiveness to citizens (Noblet, Rodwell and McWilliams, 2006; Page, 2005; Vigoda-Gadoti and Meiri, 2008). When first describing NPM, Hood (1991) identified seven doctrinal components: (1) 'hands on' professional management in the public sector ('free to manage'); (2) explicit standards and measures of performance (definition of goals, targets and indicators of success); (3) a greater emphasis on output control (linking resources and rewards to performance); (4) a shift to the disaggregation of units (into smaller manageable units, includes decentralised budgets); (5) a greater emphasis on increased competition (contracts and public tendering to encourage higher standards at lower costs); (6) a stress on private sector styles of management practice (enhancing flexibility of recruitment and reward processes); and (7) a stress on greater discipline and more economical use of resources (to maximise public resources) (pp. 4-5). In the almost two decades following a range of characteristics of NPM have been identified: downsizing; using market mechanisms to serve public purposes; an emphasis on outputs and the attainment of results (rather than input and procedure); fostering greater accountability and transparency from providers; providing higher-quality services; decentralisation; and the devolution of authority (Bradley and Parker, 2006; Cole and Jones, 2005; Robbins, 2007; Simonet, 2008; Vigoda-Gadoti and Meiri, 2008).

Australian Context
The main thrust of the Australian NPM reforms was towards more specialised or single purpose organisations; decentralisation of authority from the centre; and decreasing the size of public organisations by breaking up and downsizing large bureaucratic organisations (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004). During the 1990s, the Howard Government opted for a combination of *marketize* (the introduction of competitive pressures into the public sector) and *minimise* (emphasis on privatisation) (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004). This involved the utilisation of quasi-markets, large-scale contracting-out and market-testing, contractual appointments and performance pay for civil servants, recruiting people external to the public sector, and the adoption of private sector techniques such as accruals-accounting, Business Process Re-engineering (BPR), benchmarking and franchising (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004). In addition, organisations were restructured, strategic plans were developed, quality improvement initiatives were launched, and the performance of others were measured, audited and evaluated (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004). Throughout this time, there was also a new emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery, as citizens were now thought of as customers and clients (APSC, 2003).

A critical tool for operationalising these major changes were profound reconfigurations to the employment relations. During the 1990s significant reform was enacted which involved the devolution of employer status and the associated power over staffing to agency heads. The legislative mechanisms that enabled this were the *Workplace Relations Act 1996 (WR Act)* and the *Public Service Act 1999 (PS Act)*. The previous Labor government had enabled a general shift toward enterprise bargaining, however a radical change came with the *WR Act 1996* which left awards as safety nets, facilitated the introduction of non-union collective agreements and also individual contracts otherwise known as Australian Workshops Agreements (AWAs), which allowed for individualised terms and conditions of employment to be negotiated In the Australian Public Service decentralisation to the agency and individual level was enacted through the adopted of the *PS Act* which devolved responsibility for agency management to agency heads (including engagement of staff and the authority to determine their remuneration and terms of conditions of employment), focussed on the APS values; included a legally enforceable code of conduct; and it included specific provisions regarding the merit principle and whistleblowing by APS staff; mechanisms for review of any action affecting APS employees' employment; and the establishment of an office of Merit Protection Commissioner (APSC, 2003). Further legislative mechanisms were developed in the 1990s to provide agency heads with greater flexibility and autonomy in the management of their departments, with the establishment of the *Financial Management and Accountability Act 1997* (FMA Act) (APSC, 2003). Another typical development in NPM countries was the appointment of top officials on two-, three-, or five-year performance-related contracts (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004). In Australia, there was a movement from permanent tenure to fixed term appointments for departmental Secretaries (APSC, 2003). The Australian story mirrors the general story of employment reforms were enacted across the world which focused mainly on results, flexibility and incentives commonly enacted through an expansion of contract or contingent employment, performance pay, the appointment of 'outsiders', and contracting out (Hughes, 2003).

IMPACT ON EMPLOYEE RELATIONS

Employee relations in its simplest terms considers the relationship between management and workers within an organisation, especially how it is structured and administered in order to achieve the multiple goals and outcomes required by both sides of this association (Gallie, White, Yuan and Tomlinson, 1998). It is clear that how such a relationship is undertaken must have significant impacts upon organisational outcomes and the attitude and willingness of those working within the organisations (Atchison, 1991: O'Donnell, 1995). The onset of NPM led to a significantly reduced security of tenure (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004) and public sector managers reported that they have felt themselves under closer scrutiny than ever before regarding their results (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004). Such scrutiny and measurement will drive the behaviour of the agency (Blackman, 2006) and as agencies were measured within and against each other following the decentralisation of authority as regarded the management of agency staff and determining their appointment, separation, terms and conditions, the concept of a unified public service was essentially abandoned (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004). The devolution of employer status and the shift to agency level recruitment, selection and setting of terms and conditions of employment has driven competition between the agencies for staff and resources has accentuated this focus upon agencies as discrete and separate entities so that in 2008, only 40% of SES definitely saw themselves as a part of a broader leadership cadre whilst most identified with their own agency (APSC, 2008).

Moreover, reforms enacted in the NPM era have resulted in increased workload and responsibility at all levels with the pressure to increase flexibility whilst reducing numbers employed. Middle managers have expanded job roles and greater strategic and non-routine responsibilities coexisted with even greater obligations for routine administration, monitoring and communication on a day-to-day basis (Butterfield, Edwards and Woodall, 2005). Increased team sizes and accountability reporting have also led to a tendency to 'play safe' by paying attention

to routine monitoring and controls, behaviour reinforced by an obligation to work to the performance indicators. It can, therefore, be argued that as an indirect result of the reform agenda agencies are finding working together harder. The increased workload leads to a greater focus on short term goals and wider, more strategic initiatives are lost.

In recent years the realisation that an agency-focus has created problems in a more strategic whole-of-public-service approach has underpinned attention vertical coordination and collaboration. In Australia this has been termed whole of government and has been proposed as a means of enabling more efficient and effective policy-making, implementation and service delivery (MAC, 2004).

EMERGING WHOLE OF GOVERNMENT RESPONSES

Effective holistic policy making has become more difficult due not only to the changes in employee relations, but also due to the managerial reforms favoured by NPM, including the separation of policy from delivery, concentration by departments on their core businesses, contracting out, privatisation, and creation of agencies or units working to their own performance targets (Bakvis, 2002; Kavanagh and Richards, 2001). This vertical organisation of public service departments gives rise to departmentalism and skews government efforts away from certain activities, such as prevention, since the benefits of the preventive action often come to another department. Over time it reinforces the tendency common to all bureaucracies of devoting more energy to the protection of turf rather than serving the public (Mulgan, 2002).

The popularity of decentralisation and the apparent growth in vertical management structures, lead to a growth of concern for 'joined-up government' and 'cross-cutting issues' (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004). Clear evidence of the limitations of NPM in addressing more complex problems enhanced the need for joined up approaches (Mulgan, 2002), as did increasing government fragmentation caused by changes related to these reforms that placed the focus on narrow agency targets which inhibited the effectiveness, quality and efficiency of government (Christensen and Lagreid, 2007; Goodship and Cope, 2001; Moore and Keen, 2007). Increasing specialisation implied a need for greater efforts at coordination, and devolution of authority tended to increase coordination difficulties (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004).

In Australia WG was defined as "public service agencies working across portfolio boundaries to achieve a shared goal and an integrated government response to particular issues. Approaches can be formal and informal. They can focus on policy development, program management and service delivery" (MAC, 2006, p. 1; Shergold, 2004). It was clear that for such approaches to be successful changes would need to be made to work practices. Advice was given in terms of the structures, cultures and systems required for effective implementation, with many of these potentially impacted upon the employment relationship in terms of how people would be organised, managed and rewarded. The question this paper considers is whether the current practices are enabling WG practices and, if not, what would need to be changed to enable this to occur.

METHODOLOGY

We draw on a large-scale project examining WG experiments in the APS where there has been much experimenting but little empirical work to date. Consequently, a qualitative study was undertaken seeking to understand and explore current practice (Creswell, 2003; Leedy and Ormond, 2005). Organisational expectations were researched by using a case study approach as it enabled an in-depth investigation into a specific set of circumstances in a particular context (Yin, 2003a; 2003b). The investigation of phenomena within a case is supported by Yin (2003b) who argues that case studies are particularly appropriate where the observer has access to a novel, previously unexplained phenomenon. In each case semi-structured, individual and group

interviews were undertaken; in addition material in the public domain and documents provided by the organisations such as strategic plans, committee minutes, briefing documents and program evaluations were also examined.   Three APS agencies (one central and two delivery) have been studied considering what WG initiatives are in place and what are the barriers and enablers to their effective working. Thematic analysis has been undertaken (Pandit, 1996; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) and several key themes emerged which highlighted why the current employment relationships are not supporting WG working: delegation of employer status; vertical and programmatic management focus; reward and incentive structures; a lack of shared outcomes; and lack of re-configuration.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Delegation of employer status
There was general agreement that there had been clear consequences as a result of each agency being able to employ its own employees under their own contracts. As a result of the changes there has, according to many participants, been a move away from the concept of 'One APS' such that the agencies talk of each other as very different entities with very different cultures. Individuals have a relationship, not with the APS but with their agency, and as that gets stronger it will be harder for employees to work across boundaries; job security is a major factor in developing a psychological contract and so with the increases in flexible and short-term contracts employees are more focussed upon the agency that pays them (Rousseau and Shperling, 2003). Moreover, there is a greater focus upon the transactional side of the contract as the relational contract has already been breached as security is reduced and the focus has become about wages and conditions (Cullinane and Dundon, 2006). In each agency participants commented that this driving apart of the agencies has reduced the capacity to see WG practices as core business. Moreover, if such flexible arrangements were to be effective employees had to buy in to the change and develop entrepreneurial skills that embraced the differences in working style (Atchison, 1991). In fact, people mostly became defensive and risk averse in order to ensure meet program targets, maintain job security and long term stability.

Vertical and programmatic management focus
In addition to WG being limited by the focus upon the agency, further barriers were identified as emerging from the strong programmatic focus. It was argued that WG was counter-cultural, with all the behaviour drivers being set up to maintain the current vertical focus. The APS remains strongly hierarchical and has a long history of seniority being the driving power. This reduces the likelihood that WG practices will develop as every current norm increases the likelihood of formalised 'silos'. Almost every interviewee used the word 'silo' to describe the current arrangements and argued that their existence was encouraged by the current employment relationships and practices. Moreover, the focus on programme was seen to reduce the opportunities for strategic sharing which reduced the likelihood of future moves towards WG without planned management changes.

Reward and incentive structures
As indicated above every agency has different employment arrangements - performance management, incentive and reward structures are all different which is seriously affecting the transferability of staff between agencies. There can be major differentials between the same level in each agency which potentially leads to employment decisions based on remuneration structures, thus reducing mobility across agencies. Moreover, each is focussed on maintaining their vertical alignment on programme and agency and this is being done through the evaluations of programmes and individuals which lead to the focus being upon the projected outputs and not client expectations. Reward and incentive structures are formally set up to create this program focus which, in practice, undermines any attempt at cross-agency work. In effect, there is little, if any, incentive nor associated reward for those that excel at WG working.

A lack of shared outcomes

It was generally agreed that a major problem with each of the WG initiatives was that, partly as a result of the different employment systems, but more as a result of the programmatic focus, there were few shared outcomes. Examples were given where WG does work and it was argued that it was usually in times of crisis such as the Victorian bushfires where everyone had a clear, shared vision of what was required. These cases along with other potential crises, could drive effective WG working, but less directed projects are less likely to succeed as in these cases there is a reversion to the agency and programs as the driver of all behaviours.

No re-configuration

A further barrier was held to be a lack of change in the way that the agencies are structured. Examples were given where a specific WG project was set up: although the argument for WG was made clearly and collocation of agencies was set up to enable WG working, there was no other re-configuration that occurred. The reporting relationships, power differentials and culture remained intact; for the most part although there was apparent change through agency collocation in fact the same people were doing the same jobs in the same places.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EMPLOYEE RELATIONS

The general views from the interviewees were that there was no real commitment to WG working and that this was evidenced by the lack of changes in the ways that employees and the processes were managed. Despite a wide rhetoric about outcomes it was claimed that, in fact, the majority of managers were focussed upon the programmes, and that clients were expected to fit in with the agency rather than the other way around.

It was argued in all cases that there needed to be changes that would support horizontal working: the ideas offered by matrix management were posited; it has been argued that these ideas, whereby there are dual reporting lines enabling a focus on program and outcomes, could be adopted (Atkinson, 2003). In terms of the employment practices performance review and issues of remuneration would need to be addressed in order to ensure that the horizontal processes are supported.

There was some consensus that for there to be new ways of working there would need to be 'champions' who were recruited with skills that would challenge the current ways of working and be able to undertake the negotiating, networking and facilitation considered vital for effective WG. It was also suggested that where there has been success in terms of managing to develop and support WG behaviours there were certain individuals who acted as boundary spanners (Williams, 2002) who enabled different groups of people to share ideas and develop shared outcomes. We would suggest that this should be one of the capabilities actively sought and encouraged in order to develop the capacity to not only span, but actively shake, boundaries (Balogun, Gleadle, Haileyand Willmott, 2005) To support these, the active management of employee relations needs to be considered: how can the behaviours required be supported by new arrangements which encourage novelty such as ideals whereby it is recognised that certain individuals need to have a different form of arrangements in order to be able to act in a different way (Rousseau, Ho and Greenberg, 2006).

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have considered the relationship between WG activity and employee relations; it is posited that the changes in employee relations that occurred as a result of the implementation of NPM strategies have reduced the propensity and probability of working horizontally, thereby reducing the effectiveness of WG initiatives. We argue that if WG activity is a necessary element of a successful APS strategy then there will need to be a reconsideration of the APS employee relations model, and agency approaches. The current structures that

challenge horizontal working would need to be rethought and greater levels of flexibility be supported within the system. We call for research that considers what the crucial employee relations elements are and how they can be changed to actively support WG in the future.

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