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## Theory to Practice

*Response to  
Commentaries*

*Article*

### Public Administration Review

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### Managing Successful Organizational Change in the Public Sector: An Agenda for Research and Practice

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When Bob Durant told us the names of those he had recruited to comment on our change paper, we were glad to hear he had attracted people of such high quality. We also hoped, of course, that these high-caliber commentators would find some value in our efforts. Their comments achieve a balance between civility and constructiveness towards our paper, on the one hand, and addressing shortcomings and raising important additional issues and questions, on the other. In our response to the commentators, we start by naming them formally (as Professor, etc.), a courtesy they extended to us, but then we use first names for them and for us. We do this for brevity, and for an informality that we hope will promote communication and invite other readers to join this discussion. And we do not mean that they have to be nice; we are not trying to ingratiate anyone. The comments do raise numerous issues. We identify some of these in the form of ques-

tions that we see the comments raising, either explicitly or implicitly.

#### **Been There, Done That? Do We Add Value?**

Professors Patrick Connor and Fred Thompson point out that there are many, many lists of change steps such as ours. They describe some additional ones that we do not include in our review. They are certainly right. Whether they intended to or not, this raises the question of whether we simply provide another list. They and Professor Mary Tschirhart and Mr. Chris Mihm all point to limitations and omissions in our set of propositions, such as lack of attention to external collaboration and to networks. Chris shows considerable forbearance, because he could easily have called us copycats. A less constructive commentator might say, "Don't you realize we had a major forum and we put together a very similar framework that you should have taken into account in

yours? Does yours really add anything?" One reviewer on the manuscript we submitted for review at *Public Administration Review (PAR)* expressed the concern that many public administrators would accept the value of these propositions in general, but we do too little to show how administrators can apply them to all the various types of change and change situations that they might face.

Actually, we welcome the comments on shortcomings or needed additions and extensions. We sought to justify our effort by inviting such reactions. We were reviewing available academic and professional literature. The literature is voluminous, complex, conflicting, and often inconclusive. Some perspectives attribute organizational change to forces acting on the organization rather than to human beings acting within it. Others impute influence to human agency, concluding that human initiative and action matter. One also might respond by simply throwing up one's hands and turning to another topic. Bennis and Nanus illustrated another form of response in their study of leaders. They proclaimed that in the huge body of research on leadership, "never have so many labored so long to say so little" (1985, 4). They then launched into their own new study of leadership, having exempted themselves from the responsibility to review all that research. We responded differently, seeking to review and consider as much of the literature as we could, to try to contribute summary propositions for researchers to refine and analyze, validate or reject. We worked under sharp space constraints. The comments suggest to us that we did bring sufficient clarity and focus to the discussion to prompt intelligent reactions about what we did, and did not, accomplish and what more we and others need to consider.

As Mary points out, we focused on the perspective that emphasizes the role of human agency—that suggests that other human initiative and responsibility can influence organizational change and make it succeed. We reviewed the literature on successful and unsuccessful large-scale, planned, "transformational" organizational change, looking for points of consensus. We wanted to state these in a way that moved them toward testable propositions for additional research to refine and analyze. We also suggested that administrators could consider these propositions in thinking about and leading such changes.

We did not mean to imply that we think the "management matters" view prevails. This matter relates to classic intellectual and philosophical dilemmas over how much human intention and action matter in life. Among many examples, Doig and Hargrove (1999) discuss the centuries-old controversy over whether leaders really matter. Some intellectuals over the years have claimed that leaders determine major historical developments. Others contend that forces around leaders sweep them along on a tide upon which they temporarily float.<sup>1</sup>

We cannot resolve this longstanding philosophical disagreement, but we can pursue research on the factors that can increase the probability that large-scale change will succeed. The commentators all add to this effort. Mary points to limitations in our treatment of external forces, of networks, and of unplanned change. Patrick and Fred add valuable extensions such as a typology of the roles that change agents can play. They also describe a normative ideal of a communal, cooperative change process that everyone should consider as an alternative preferable to the approach they regard our

propositions as implying, an approach that is too "top down."

Chris's description of the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) forum and report makes a very important contribution (U.S. GAO 2002) to our exchange here. Chris draws attention to that report, and we all need to be aware of it. Late in our work on our manuscript, as deadlines approached, we learned of the report and downloaded an e-copy of it from the GAO website. In the press of business we did not get it covered in our review—Hal's fault, not Sergio's.

With Chris's contribution, we now get to address the report and its relation to ours. The GAO report has different sources and purposes from ours, and we regard the similarities between its "lessons" and our propositions as very significant. The participants in the GAO forum (see pp. 17-18 of the report) were mostly officials from government and executives from private corporations. There is virtually no overlap between these participants and our sources, except that Charles Rossotti participated in the GAO forum and we drew on his recent book as an important source (Rossotti 2005). They sought lessons for practicing managers; we reviewed academic and professional literature, seeking points of consensus to state as propositions for researchers to test, that might also be useful to practitioners. Hal's failure to cover the GAO report in the review thus becomes serendipitous in that it affords an unintended convergence on similar conclusions, through different procedures, and drawing on different sources.

We find it very interesting that Chris immediately understands the types of changes we are talking about. One anonymous *PAR* reviewer expressed the concern that our propositions were too general to apply to all

the many different types of changes going on in government. Chris, from his very important vantage point as Managing Director of Strategic Issues for GAO, grasps immediately what we mean by large-scale, planned, transformational change initiatives, even though a precise definition of such changes remains elusive. He understands why such change initiatives figure so importantly in contemporary efforts to meet the challenges that government must face. He agrees that, while our propositions might seem like common sense that any reasonable person would accept, part of the importance of emphasizing the "lessons" of the GAO report and our propositions arises because leaders and change participants all too frequently *fail* to adhere to them or apply them.

Together, the commentators suggest that we missed some things and got some things wrong, or at least in need of revision and extension. They also appear to provide us some justification for the claim that we have contributed some value to discourse on this crucial topic.

### **Are We Too Bossy?**

Patrick and Fred, as well as Mary, find our propositions too authoritarian, although they do not use that term. We read their comments as saying that we propose vesting too much authority in managers to impose change in a top-down fashion and assume too much ability on their part to do so. Mary describes our paper as a "...celebration of leaders and managers' ability to shape organizations." She writes that besides our first proposition, "none of the other propositions...suggests that managers should justify the objectives driving an intended change." We imply, she writes, "...that any desired change by managerial leaders will, if successfully implemented, result in organizational success."

Similar to Mary's critique, Patrick and Fred explicitly find fault with our choice of terms, saying that our word choices and our more general perspective imply the desirability or effectiveness of top-down imposition of change. Such terms as "overcome," "convince," and "manage participation" conflict with other terms we use, such as "open discussion" and "active participation." Our propositions, they say, imply that managers know best, and employees should do as they are told. They make the very important point that, ideally, change agents want to foster "...engagement, caring, ownership, and commitment..." in the change process, and such behaviors and attitudes do not come from being overcome, "...or, we dare say, 'managed.'" They describe and advocate a much more communal, cooperative process than we do, involving "...many—read most—members...." (We will return to this "most" word below.)

We plead guilty—but not very guilty—and then only guilty in certain ways. Looking back, especially at our table rather than the text of our paper, we now see that one can read it as implying a very top-down orientation. We now see, for example, that a reasonable person could read the propositions in the table, especially the first two, as suggesting that leaders at the top can and should devise the change in Olympian isolation on high and then impose it by overcoming resistance. If we had it to do over again, we would seek different words, but right now we are still considering what words to choose.

In response to Mary's comments, we do not see ourselves as "celebrating" managers' ability to impose their pet and personally devised changes. We did not have on party hats while we were trying to summarize the points of consensus we saw in the numerous studies we reviewed. We state these propo-

sitions as points of consensus that need further attention from researchers, not as approaches that we "celebrate" in some way. Nor did we state or imply that any of them are easy, such that managers can readily carry them out. Remember that we said, and Chris agreed, that a reason to state propositions and lessons comes from the frequent failure to comply with them. We regard large-scale change as extremely challenging and prone to failure.

We just got Lawler and Worley's (2006) recent book, *Built to Change*. Lawler has been for some time one of the most productive and prominent researchers in organizational behavior. Recently he has authored books on "high involvement" organizations that depict the sort of orientation that Patrick and Fred describe (noted above) as leading to organizational success. In their new book, Lawler and Worley write that, "The reality is that most heroic leaders fail in their attempts to change organizations. Study after study has shown that most would-be saviors are unsuccessful in producing significant organization change" (2006, 16). Elsewhere, for example, Hal has contrasted a case of a failed change in the State Department with a successful change in the Social Security Administration (Rainey 2003, 382-89). Hal concluded that the former change failed in part because it violated Greiner's (1967) admonition, years ago, that "top down fiats" do not produce successful change. The latter change succeeded in large part because of experienced leaders who fostered significant participation and power sharing.

When we threw in our lot with the "management matters" perspective, we did so after reviewing alternative perspectives that, to oversimplify them a bit, hold that management actions cannot and do not lead to important changes in organizations. We did

want to find propositions about when managerial actions can make a difference, since we want to support leaders trying to improve government organizations. Our propositions and discussion of them do not suggest that change is easy or that management should be deified.

Mary also offers the following critique:

Professors Fernandez and Rainey tell us little about how to uncover and understand the norms, attitudes, and beliefs that may be behind resistance. Adopting the language of many change consultants, their prescriptions suggest that resistance is something to be overcome, not something that may be appropriate. Acceptance that some resistance may be appropriate and beneficial to organizational success comes with the implication that scholars and managers should consider strategies and incentives for appreciating and fostering resistance, as well as overcoming it.

Mary is right that we do not explain how to analyze such things as norms and attitudes that may lie behind resistance. Certainly the possible legitimacy of resistance and the effort to analyze, understand, and even encourage it are very important. It would have been easy enough to cite some of the literature on survey feedback and process consultation from the organizational development literature, but that material is widely familiar to most people with enough interest to read a paper such as ours. Our language may be similar to that of some change consultants, but it comes from academic and professional literature, not from practicing consultants.

We thought that the context of the words we used and the rest of our discussion were actually more consistent with Mary's perspective than she feels it is. Just after the heading for "Factor 1: Ensure the need..." we refer to the literature, concluding that it is important "...that leaders verify the need for change and persuade other members of the organization and important external stake-

holders of the need for change." A few paragraphs later, we write about "the importance of determining the need for change and persuasively communicating it, through a continuing process of exchange with as many stakeholders and participants as possible." Under "Factor 3: Build internal support..." the first two paragraphs clearly address the point that people in organizations often have sound justifications for resistance.

We link this matter back to the earlier points about ensuring the need, indicating that where employees are resisting for legitimate reasons, leaders have not verified and justified the need for change. We may not go into sufficient detail about the potential legitimacy of resistance and how to analyze it, but we do acknowledge its possible legitimacy and the need for leaders continually to communicate with stakeholders and participants. If we sound as if we thought executives in organizations can administer significant organizational change like a mythical deity hurling thunderbolts from atop a cloud, we did not mean to. In fact, we think a careful reading of the text of our paper shows that we did not.

We ask for closer attention to the way our wording of the propositions and our discussion in the text of the paper indicate how one should interpret such phrases as "ensure the need" for change and "build support" for change. Our discussion places a great deal of responsibility on leaders to avoid excessively top-down approaches and poorly justified and poorly legitimated change initiatives. We note the problem of faddish change initiatives that do much more harm than good, but that unfortunately are common or even prevalent (for a wonderfully amusing but significant satiric analysis on the all-too-common pattern of "redisorganization," see Oxman, Sackett, Chalmers, and

Prescott 2005). Saying that leaders have to ensure the need for the change places on them a major responsibility to verify that the change is necessary, justified, and legitimate. To us, this very challenging process would inevitably involve conferring with others, inside and outside the organization, including members of the organization at different levels and representatives of groups within the organization.

If we say change leaders and change agents must build support for the change through widespread participation, what does the requirement for genuine participation imply? Participation, especially as we have discussed it in the text, to us implies back-and-forth communication, involvement, an effort to understand each other, and power sharing. If we did not make this sufficiently clear, we should have, and we appreciate the commentators pressing us on this in a way that allows us to respond.

Another reason for further attention to the wording of our propositions and our discussion of them concerns how we should approach the interpretation of terms that we use. Of course language is important, but at what point do we cross into some domain of administrative correctness (AC) that resembles political correctness? Consider a form of AC where we pounce on certain words that someone uses and impute to them our own meanings and connotations from among multiple ones; then, we attribute these meanings to the author of the words. Do we not need to be careful to avoid too much of this, since it is inimical to the form of tolerance, open communication, and cooperation that Patrick and Fred, as well as Mary, espouse? For example, note that the GAO report says that one of the important lessons is that top leadership must "drive" the change processes. A practitioner of AC can be predicted to react by accusing the

participants in the GAO forum of wanting the top bosses to conduct organizational change initiatives like a cattle drive! How could they be so callous as to imply that people should be treated like livestock? An alternative interpretation would be that the GAO participants were emphasizing the important point that top leaders really have to invest in a legitimate change initiative, devote time and resources to it, and otherwise nurture it.

As another example, Mary and Patrick and Fred may find negative, authoritarian connotations in the term "overcome." Certainly, however, they would not object when people want to commemorate the civil rights movement by singing its anthem, *We Shall Overcome*. The positive and negative implications of words are multiple, context dependent, and seldom absolute. What if the resistance we are overcoming is resistance within organizations to the implementation of equal employment opportunity laws and policies?<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, the term "management" does not to us imply goose-stepping into the room and barking commands at cowering underlings. Authors in the general management literature and in public administration have made a lot of important points about negative connotations that some emphases on "management" can have. But the term can have positive connotations as well. It can imply taking responsibility as opposed to shirking it, and as we clearly state, it means providing support and resources for worthwhile change initiatives. When Patrick and Fred said that being "managed" does not lead to the engagement they would aspire to in leading a change effort, note that we emphasized managing participation, not people. That includes providing resources, reasonable planning and organization, and other conditions and actions necessary for effec-

tive communication and participation. To fail to "manage" the process of engagement, involvement, and communal exchange can mean to let these processes starve. We suggest that we also need to be very careful about attributing attitudes, intent, and positions advocated on the basis of word choices alone.

### **Are They Too Trusting?**

Yet another reason for us to plead at least partially guilty to the suggestions that we appear too top down is that "top down-ness" and administrative authority have a place in this discussion. In addition, if we go too far in the direction of emphasizing cooperative and communal discourse, at what point do we become reliant on assuming benign conditions in organizations (more on this in the next section)? Fred and Patrick point out that the perspective that management knows, employees do as they are told, is a "time honored" perspective, and they propose an alternative one. We certainly see what they mean and agree. However, a simplistic, authoritarian perspective hardly commands much credibility and respect in contemporary management thought, although management practice is a different matter.

Rather, management writers currently pour forth a virtual crescendo of calls for empowerment, teamwork and team orientations, participation, power sharing, high involvement, decentralization, flexibility, and related concepts that we might refer to generally as pertaining to "organizational democracy." The widespread acceptance of this general orientation among management writers and researchers forms an important contextuating feature in our paper. We took it for granted that virtually everyone writing about management espouses some fairly high degree of organizational democracy.

One can argue that this orientation represents not a very recent alternative to a time-honored authoritarian perspective, but rather a dominant orthodoxy in academic discourse on organizations and management. Might it be possible that this orthodoxy shows up in some of the commentators' apparent disapproval of our even implying that administrative leaders at the top might exercise some authority without elaborately seeking the approval, indeed, the permission of the people in the organization? Might this orthodoxy be in play when the commentators at points assume the legitimacy of resistance, when resistance can arise from very selfish motives and other bad reasons? To call the organizational democracy perspective an orthodoxy is not to condemn it. There are still plenty of managers out there who behave as if they are enacting the stereotype of the military martinet, and executives who behave as if they are determined to make the appellation "robber baron" into a euphemism when it is applied to them. They need a dose of this orthodoxy. Still, we need to consider how viable an extreme version of the organizational democracy perspective can be in large, complex organizational change initiatives.

We draw on the available literature, and the GAO report draws on the collective wisdom of executives, officials, and other experts. Both we and GAO use language that sounds to Mary and to Patrick and Fred as if it advocates "top-down" approaches. In a sense it does, because there is a strong consensus in this literature that without leadership support from people with sufficient authority and resources, large-scale change falters. Even in more organizational democracy perspectives, how is all the communing, communicating, involving, engaging, analyzing resistance, and other enlightened activity

going to occur if no one "manages" the process because management is a dirty word? A coalition of leaders and change agents have to plan and organize such processes, put time and resources into them, and otherwise move them along.

Patrick and Fred mention the organizational leader who says, "Meanwhile, we have a business to run." People have work to do, and one of the great risks that change leaders note comes from the possibility that the change process will severely disrupt ongoing operations. As Mary emphasizes, people may have legitimate reasons to resist change, but a lot of important stakeholders may insist at the same time that change is absolutely necessary. Virtually no one proposes that top leadership should ram a change down the throats of organizational members, and virtually everyone calls for participation and communication. Almost everyone in this literature, however, and virtually every executive experienced in large-scale change, observes that there must be some significant degree of top-down support for the change process. The challenge comes in finding the right balance.

### **Can We Assume Benign Conditions? Self Actualization at Abu Ghraib**

If we advocate communal processes of sharing, communicating, and engagement in the change process, do we need to assume benign conditions in the organization? Remember how some people chose to pursue self-actualization, to be all that you can be, at the Abu Ghraib prison. We agree with authors who say that some writers and practitioners excessively glorify change and change agents. We support the values undergirding Patrick and Fred's normative perspective, as well as Mary's, concerning justifying change, engaging rather than staunching resistance, and fostering involvement in change. At the same time, people in organi-

zations can do evil and selfish things, and they can resist change for inordinately and shortsightedly selfish and even evil reasons. As suggested by the example above of resistance to equal opportunity and justice in the workplace, some resistance needs to be overcome.

In addition, large-scale change involves issues that go beyond the legitimacy of resistance. The focal organizations in the literature and practical discourse on large-scale, planned organizational change (e.g., the GAO report) tend to be very large, complex organizations, and usually they are in some kind of trouble. There are complex political and economic issues involved. For federal agencies, among many other examples, there are often complicated relations with labor unions. As another example, related to Patrick and Fred's ideal approach that calls for involving "many—read most" organizational members, consider Rossotti (2005) and the major change initiatives at the Internal Revenue Service (IRS).

Critics in Congress, the press, and review commissions demanded change, while many people in the agency wanted none. The IRS has 100,000 employees spread all over the nation, and 120,000 during tax season. Okay, go involve "most" of them in considering and carrying out change. The IRS leadership team formed over two dozen "design teams," including people from all areas and levels of the organization, to participate in planning the changes. Rossotti and other leaders devoted tremendous amounts of time and attention to these teams, and engaged in many more meetings and communications with employees. Nevertheless, there was still significant skepticism and resistance.

At one point, some long-term IRS employees with allies in Congress sought to have Rossotti fired (Rossotti 2005, 125). Some

disgruntled employees anonymously went to the Inspector General with charges of wrongdoing against one of the executives involved in a change agent role. The charges were false and soon dismissed, but they illustrate the point that in large change processes the stakes can be very high, and some people play tough and play for keeps. Large-scale change in large complex organizations involves these kinds of realities, and this adds to the reasons why most of the writers on these kinds of changes, and leaders trying to lead them, say that there must be a significant degree of effective leadership from higher levels, and tend to regard some degree of overcoming resistance to change as inevitable.

### **How Do We Conceive Successful Change, and How Do We See It When It Happens?**

Mary makes a very important point when she says that our propositions go too far towards assuming that any change that management wants, and that gets implemented, is a successful change. Patrick and Fred make a similar point. We argued above that we do not think we went as far in that direction as they interpret us as going, but the point is still very important. We point out that even though we advance propositions about successful change, very little research has clearly demonstrated a relationship between patterns or characteristics of large-scale changes and subsequent improvements in organizational performance.

As Chris points out, there is some evidence of subsequent declines in performance. This is consistent with Mary's concern about how we know if the changes undertaken are really appropriate to the needs, well-justified, and well chosen. Some of the authors who exalt "leadership" at the expense of "management" claim that, "Managers do things right. Leaders do the right thing."

One might develop a similar saying to express Mary's point: "Change management involves making a change right. Genuine change leadership makes the right changes." We do need more attention to how people in organizations effectively identify the changes needed, as opposed to simply proposing how any change can be successfully implemented. We do think, however, that our propositions suggest that successful change tends to be legitimated, well-chosen, well-designed, well-justified change, and we do think there are some answers about how one identifies such changes.

Using the participation and communication activities described earlier, Rossotti (2005) and others led major changes at the IRS, to which there was considerable internal resistance; the statistics on "customer satisfaction," employee satisfaction, and tax administration operations ultimately improved and are still improving under the new Commissioner, who has kept them in place. Similarly, some years ago the Social Security Administration made some major changes, facing as it did a backlog of one million cases. And those changes, to which there was significant internal resistance, have also succeeded quite well. The leadership of the changes involved a great deal of investment in participatory diagnosis of the challenges and selection of the changes to be undertaken (Rainey 1990; Rainey 2003, 382-89; Rainey and Rainey 1986).

### **When Will We Stop?**

Now. The commentators offer many more important additions, criticism, and suggestions. We would like to discuss many of these matters at much greater length, but we should avoid going on too long at this point. We will stop here, expressing thanks to the commentators and to readers who have borne with us this far.

## Notes

1. In *War and Peace*, for example, Tolstoy virtually ridicules Napoleon as an egotist who suffered defeat due to forces, such as the spirit of the Russian people and the Russian winter, that he could not control and did not effectively anticipate.
2. Such resistance caused the coining of the term "affirmative action" and accompanying policies to require members of organizations to show affirmative action in complying with laws and policies aimed at promoting racial fairness and justice in workplaces, and fairness and justice for females.

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