

“Public Service Transitions”

Notes for Remarks to the
CSPS Conference

Thriving in Transitions

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Introduction

- Let me say right off the bat that I think this is a *marvellous* theme for a conference of Public Service executives. And I am delighted to have been asked to lead this workshop on Public Service transitions.
 - Delighted because our topic has led me to reflect on what I have learned about transitions during nearly thirty years in and around the federal Public Service.
 - And delighted because I cannot think of a topic that is of greater relevance today to senior managers like yourselves.
- We have an hour and a half. I don't want to talk for the whole time, but I do want to put a few propositions on the table that I hope will serve to focus our discussion and stimulate your own thinking.
- Our topic is transitions in the Public Service.
 - I would observe that while some of these are caused or stimulated by political transitions and by politicians in particular, many are not. That is, many are decided and driven by Deputies and ADMs. I plan to say a few words about *both* sorts of changes.
 - A second observation – transitions always have an impact on people. What they can mean for managers *as individuals* is something Jim Ninninger is talking about in his workshop.
 - What they mean for you *as managers of people*, is something we should talk about here. That is to say, I want to talk today about how Public Service transitions can affect your responsibilities as managers, and what you as managers might want to think about when you are going through a transition.

Transitions

- I suppose most Canadians would tend think of the Public Service as a relatively stable place, in which people enjoy relatively stable employment.
- I joined the Public Service in 1978, and ever since then it seems as if we have been in a constant state of upheaval.
- Consider my first department – Foreign Affairs. When I came back to Ottawa from my first posting in the fall of 1981, I was looking ahead to work in the headquarters of what I, like all my colleagues, assumed was one of the truly 'fixed points' in the Ottawa universe. After all, every country needs a foreign ministry and we, the members of what was then External Affairs, felt we had one of the best.
- Not six months later – what happened? The January 12, 1982 reorganization, a change that tore apart the old Department of Industry, Trade and Commerce and brought the old "External" into a sudden process of transition that really only settled down in the last few years. And when it did – when the transition seemed finally to be over – what happened? The new Prime Minister decided to take Trade *out* of Foreign Affairs and create a separate Trade Department.
- More upheaval, more transition.

- As I look around the government universe, I cannot see a single department that has not been affected in one way or another by major organizational change – not just since 1980, but within the past decade or so.
- Think of them:
 - in 1993, CEIC and SecState disappeared, and the new HRDC emerged.
 - part of DOC went to form the new Canadian Heritage Department, and part to a new Department of Industry.
 - Agriculture became “Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada”.
- Over the past decade or so:
 - DFO gained the Coast Guard, and more recently the Coast Guard became an SOA
 - Revenue Canada became a service agency, as did Parks Canada
 - the Food Inspection Branch of Agriculture is now the CFIA
 - Transport went from being one of the biggest departments in government to one of the smallest
 - dozens of agencies were wound up, merged or re-mandated
 - Supply and Services merged with Public Works, and now PWGSC is changing again.
- In December, 2003:
 - HRDC became HRSDC and SDC
 - Trade, as I mentioned, was split off from Foreign Affairs, and
 - parts of Industry Canada were split off to join Trade
- And most recently, in the February 2005 Budget the Prime Minister announced the government’s commitment to creating Service Canada – an initiative that will have a profound impact on many thousands of employees in HRSDC and SDC.
- *Is there anyone in this room who has not been touched by major, externally-imposed organizational change in the past ten years?*
- That’s one sort of change. The impact can be traumatic.
- Here are some others:
 - **changes of senior management** – Ministers, Deputies, ADMs
 - a new leader usually means a new direction, a different style of management, new expectations. Sometimes it means having to prove yourself, long after you would have thought that necessary
 - Ministers change regularly, and so do Deputies.
 - **system changes** – a new Public Service employment regime, or a new system of classification
 - **new doctrine** – the best recent example is the new approach to financial management and comptrollership being promulgated by the President of the Treasury Board and the new Comptroller General.

- Changes like these can affect thousands of managers and even more clients
 - **new political circumstances** – we're living at least three of them right now:
 - new government
 - in a minority situation
 - in the aftermath of a major scandal over spending and accountability
 - *Is there anyone here who feels their working life has not been affected by the circumstances I have just listed?*
- And I could mention still others as well:
 - being privatized (e.g., NAVCAN)
 - being shifted to another jurisdiction (e.g., the F/P/T training agreements that moved thousands of federal public servants from HRDC to the provinces)
- What is common to all these sorts of changes, and what makes them our business in this workshop rather than Jim Ninninger's in his, is that all have a major impact on your life and your responsibilities as a manager.
- That's what I think we should talk about today:
 1. how these transitions affect you as managers,
 2. what you should be aware of when you're going through a transition of this sort, and
 3. what you can do to manage better in this situation.
- After that – lots of time for questions and discussion.

How Transitions Affect Managers

- I have concluded that transitions of the sort I have just described affect managers in four major ways:
 - they impose new priorities, new directions and new demands on established units and programs
 - they disrupt normal lines of communication and authority
 - they force a re-examination of the status quo – a status quo in which every manager-in-place has at least a certain investment
 - and for all these reasons, they create uncertainty in the minds of managers and staff alike.
- One can think of other important impacts, I'm sure. (Perhaps you can write them down to share in our discussion).
- Many people, including me, believe that the costs of organizational change (perhaps the most dramatic of the 'transitions' that we face as Public Service managers) often outweigh the benefits. (A friend of my says "reorganization ought to be the last resort of scoundrels, not the first".)

- The truth is, there are very few problems to which organizational change is the answer, and even when it's necessary, reorganization is costly in terms of loss of efficiency and the impact on people.
- I urge all of you to keep this in mind for when you become Deputies and ADMs. And as you manage through this sort of transition today, remember that every organizational change creates 'winners' and 'losers' – your staff, and your bosses, among them.

Seven Things to Remember about Transitions

- I've been thinking what I could say to you under this heading that would be both true and useful. (After all, there are probably a thousand things to remember!)
- Here are seven things you might want to bear in mind:
 1. *Transitions are a normal part of life.* And coping with them, successfully, is what you get paid for. That is to say, managing through transitions is a central part of any manager's responsibility.
 2. *The show must go on!* When you're going through a period of dramatic organizational or system change, it's easy to forget that you're being paid to deliver programs and services. Managing transitions is not an end in itself.
 3. *It is useless – and unprofessional – to resist the kinds of transitions we're talking about.*
 - Prime Ministers have the right to change the organization of the government.
 - Ministers can set new priorities.
 - Treasury Board can and will issue new policies that affect everyone.
 - And Deputies are entitled to organize their departments to fulfil the objectives set by the Minister and the Government.
 4. Having said that, *it is every manager's duty to try to shape those transitions in a way that best achieves the objectives of the government.*
 - This means, if you're asked for your best advice beforehand, give it – don't just sail in whatever direction you think the wind is blowing.
 - It also means carrying out changes that affect people in a way that is consistent with your other duties as a manager.
 5. *Your staff, and your subordinate managers, will look to you for two things during a period of transition – leadership and stability.* Indeed, the most important quality in a manager who is caught up in a major transition is unflappability:
 - being cool under pressure
 - keeping your sense of humour
 - keeping things in perspective (taking the long view)
 - giving your staff and your colleagues the feeling that through the process of change, 'here is someone we can rely on'.

6. *If you have been the subject of these various sorts of transitions in the Public Service, remember what it felt like when eventually you get into a position where you can be the author of major change.*
 - Remember how important it is to think about the people affected.
 - Remember that the business of the Public Service is not innovative public management. It is the efficient delivery of high-quality programs and services to Canadians. Don't let the management ambitions get in the way of your basic responsibilities.
7. *And finally, remember that while transitions can easily feel disruptive and threatening, they are also times of opportunity – not just for you, but for everyone.*
 - They are opportunities to re-shape organizations that may have gone stale.
 - They offer people, especially younger people, a chance to work hard and show what they can do.
 - They often demand new policy and new programs, or significant changes in how programs are delivered.
 - They are a circumstance that can bring out the best in people – it's up to you as a manager to take advantage of that.

Managing Successfully in a Transition Situation

- What words of advice can I offer those of you who are working in a transition environment today, or who may face one tomorrow? Let me offer a few thoughts that might serve as the basis for our discussion this morning.
 - *Transitions will test your leadership* – this is when your skills as a manager, and your qualities as a human being, will really matter.
 - *Communication is vitally important* – keep your staff informed; and keep affected clients and stakeholders informed. Do your best to eliminate uncertainty and anxiety (some is unavoidable); don't hide the truth; and, when decisions have been made, stay in close touch with the unions.
 - *Think ahead to make change work* – if you're going from 'A to Z', then you have to think that far ahead. Foresight means making key changes as soon as they are reasonably possible, and not stumbling forward with small steps that leave people unsure of their destination.
 - *Be clear on what is fixed and what is moveable* – if there are some things that really can't be changed, or where the cost of change exceeds the benefit, then don't do it. Find another way to the goal line.
 - *Don't forget the people* – the cost of transition in the Public Service falls largely on employees and on clients. Don't become so preoccupied with your change mandate that you forget the people affected.
 - *Keep up the momentum of change* – know that you can't take forever to achieve the objective. In my view, six months is about as long as any large group of public servants can be focused on major change. After that, they need to know they have reached their new configuration and can get down to

work.

- *In a similar vein, know when to declare victory* – know what constitutes ‘crossing the goal line’ and when you’re there, say so. People want stability and at a certain point, you will need to provide it.
- I will add only one further thought, and that is offered to you as individuals. *Don’t internalize the pressures of change.* People – both inside and outside your organization – will be counting on you, but you can’t do it alone. Look to your bosses and your colleagues for support.
- I’m going to stop here. There is doubtless a whole lot more one could say about managing transitions in the Public Service context, but we want to save time for you to share your experiences and your ideas with your colleagues.

Thank you,

Jim Mitchell