

UNLEASHING CHANGE. A STUDY OF ORGANIZATIONAL RENEWAL IN GOVERNMENT

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In the field of public management, recent studies of organizational change have often been either normative or – if analytical – focused on instrumental aspects of public sector reforms. This is the case although many landmarks in organizational theory, such as Herbert Simon (1947) or Michel Crozier (1964), had their starting point in studies of public sector and/or administrative organizations. In his latest book, Steven Kelman (Professor of Public Management at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University) takes an empirical path in order to learn more about the nature of organizational change in public sector institutions. The setting is a mix of quantitative and qualitative research approaches directed towards large-scale organizational change, based on an impressively well elaborated theory of organizational behaviour. The book is divided into two main parts: firstly, it analyses the organizational and interactional processes of the initiation of change and, secondly, it focuses on consolidating change.

The context on which the study draws is the US federal government's procurement system and its administrative organizations, both of which were reformed substantially in the 1990s. The empirical data come from two surveys of contracting employees at 19 buying offices. Five of these were in the US Army, four in the US Air Force, two in the Defense Logistics Agency, and the rest in five different civilian cabinet departments. Kelman, in addition, uses his personal experience as a federal official, responsible for the reform process himself, as a further source of knowledge. This mix of empirical data leads to a rich and lively book that switches between quantitative analyses and narrative self-descriptions, to theoretical discussions.

Kelman's findings often confirm the expectations of a reader familiar with the organizational behaviour literature. It is, for example, not surprising to find that the support of the people at the level of day-to-day work leads to faster change – as Kelman notes on page 96. There are, however, insights that were new to me. Kelman's concept of 'activating the discontented' as a path to frontline change initiation, for example, is tantalising and definitely worth considering in more depth. This is particularly the case since it seems that the existing literature took hardly any notice of this element of initiating change. As Kelman points out, in order to activate the discontented, 'leaders need not persuade, pressure, or scare people. They need only provide the opportunity for already-existing supporters to move's (p. 99).

When it comes to consolidating change, Kelman chooses to focus on two major arguments, neither of which are well prescribed in the guru literature

on organizational change. Firstly, that positive feedback leads to early (and sustainable) experience of success by the managers and staff involved. From my own practical experience of administrative reform projects in Switzerland, I can only underline the importance of positive feedback for both the public managers and politicians involved in these projects. After all, human nature generally seeks opportunities to be successful, and it is the stress of the unpredictability of reform processes that often leads to resistance among those involved. The crucial question that needs to be answered is: 'Can I be successful under the new regime that will be implemented by these reforms?'. Secondly, and related to the first, Kelman highlights the virtue of intrinsic motivation while at the same time warning against a naïve use of extrinsic incentives to motivate people. In line with the findings of economists, the use of extrinsic incentives can lead to a 'motivation crowding effect' (Frey and Jegen 2001), in that intrinsic motivation is crowded out by extrinsic incentives. Kelman's data lead to a differentiated result: On the one hand, there is good reason to be cautious with extrinsic incentives, especially when dealing with supporters of the reform. On the other, 'the data show a clear positive impact of incentives for skeptics' (p. 207).

Overall, the book constitutes an impressive piece of qualitative and quantitative social science. To many in the field of public management, it will open a window to new ways of looking at organizational change: the perspective of the organizational behaviour community. This innovative theoretical approach is the main achievement of the study. The second, and not less memorable achievement, is the lively narration of cases in which organizational change can be studied in unusual ways.

As editor in chief of the *International Public Management Journal*, Steven Kelman devotes much effort into the further collaboration between organizational theory and public management scholars, believing that the two communities can enrich each other's field. To be honest, however, Kelman does not see the two fields as really equal. Rather, he seems to imply that public management can improve its research by opening up to more generalizable management theory. On the other hand, he argues, in a new debate among management scholars, that public managers have to teach mainstream organization theorists about 'the legitimacy of prescriptive research – that is, research having a explicit goal of theorizing and gathering empirical evidence about effective practice' (Kelman 2005). His book is an important contribution to this task.

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