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Held back and pushed forward: leading change in a complex public sector environment

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# Held back and pushed forward: leading change in a complex public sector environment

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Public organizations often need to implement organizational change. Several authors have argued that the specific characteristics of public organizations make the implementation of organizational change in public organizations distinct or even more difficult. However, this issue has received little empirical investigation in both public management and change management research. Public organizations typically operate in an environment characterized by checks and balances, shared power, divergent interests and the political primate. The purpose of this paper is to advance knowledge about how the implementation of change and its leadership is affected by the complex environment in which public organizations operate.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A case study approach is adopted. A merger of three government departments in a Dutch city is selected as a case. This merger took place in an environment that became increasingly complex as the implementation process advanced. The main method of data collection was interviewing the managers that were involved in the organizational change. In all, 23 interviews were conducted and fully transcribed. The interviews were then coded using Atlas.ti software.

**Findings** – The analysis indicates that a high degree of environmental complexity forces public organizations to adopt a planned, top-down approach to change, while the effectiveness of such an approach to change is simultaneously limited by a complex environment. In addition, typical change leadership activities, such as defining the need for change, role modeling and motivating employees to implement the change, are not sufficient to implement change in a complex environment. In order to overcome environmental dependencies and maintain momentum in the change process, public managers must engage in more externally oriented leadership activities.

**Originality/value** – The paper provides empirical evidence about the relevant and rapidly growing research topic of organizational change in public organizations. The paper concludes with hypotheses that can be tested in follow-up research, and as such provides a starting point for future research concerning change management in public organizations.

**Keywords** Change management, Leadership, Public sector organizations, Environmental complexity  
**Paper type** Research paper



## Introducing change management in public sector organizations

Public organizations often attempt to implement changes in the governance, design and delivery of public services. These organizational changes typically emphasize improving efficiency and the quality of service delivery, and cutting cost expenditure (Kuipers *et al.*, 2014). In recent years, several academic studies have examined change management in public organizations (Wright *et al.*, 2013; Van der Voet *et al.*, 2013;

Fernandez and Rainey, 2006; Stewart and Kringas, 2003). While it is beyond the scope of this study to provide a full overview of the literature (see Kuipers *et al.*, 2014 for an elaborate literature review), several authors have argued that the particular characteristics of public organizations may put specific demands on the management of change (e.g. Burnes, 2009; Karp and Helgø, 2008). However, only a limited number of studies have focussed on what makes change management in public organizations specific as compared to private organizations (e.g. Robertson and Seneviratne, 1995; Van der Voet, 2014).

This study intends to contribute to our understanding of change management in public organizations by explicitly linking insights about change management in (public) organizations (Fernandez and Rainey, 2006; Kuipers *et al.*, 2014) to the literature on the specific features of public organizations (Rainey, 2014; Boyne, 2002). In particular, attention is focussed on the organizational environment of public organizations. Public organizations typically operate in an environment characterized by checks and balances, shared power, divergent interests and the primacy of politics (Boyne, 2002). Because of this, the environment of public organizations is believed to be relatively complex (Rainey, 2014). We examine the influence of the complexity of a public organization's environment on the implementation of change. Following the strong emphasis on leadership in the change management literature (e.g. Higgs and Rowland, 2005), we focus our analysis on the leadership activities within the process of organizational change. A case study approach is used to explore how public managers lead organizational change in a complex environment. A merger of three governmental departments in a Dutch city was selected as a case. This merger took place in an environment that became increasingly complex as the change process progressed. The main research question of this study is:

*RQ1.* How do public managers lead organizational change in a complex environment?

## **Theoretical background**

### *The complex environment of public organizations*

The external environment of an organization consists of the relevant physical and social factors that are located outside of the boundaries of the organization and have a bearing on the decision-making processes and behavior of actors within the organization (Duncan, 1972). According to Duncan, the degree of complexity in an organizational environment is determined by the number of factors or components in the environment that the organization is dependent on. Public organizations are often assumed to have a relatively complex environment. Public organizations deal with a multitude of stakeholders (Rainey, 2014). Like private organizations, the environment of many public organizations consists of stakeholders such as clients, partners, suppliers and even competitors. In addition, public organizations also deal with their political superiors. As a result, public managers have multiple, possibly conflicting, goals imposed on them by numerous stakeholders (Boyne, 2002). Public organizations therefore often deal with contested performance indicators and complex implementation processes. In addition to ambiguous objectives, public organizations also have to deal with distributed power and authority. Public organizations are often confronted with a great diversity and intensity of external political influences on decision-making processes. The degree of complexity in the environment of public organizations is further increased through mechanisms of public accountability. Public organizations are often subject to great scrutiny by their political superiors, the media and citizens (Rainey, 2014). This study assumes that the way organizational change is implemented connects to these environmental characteristics.

*The process of organizational change*

The distinction between planned and emergent change is the dominant way of distinguishing between different ways organizational change comes about (By, 2005; Kuipers *et al.*, 2014). Planned processes of change are programmatic changes that are implemented in a top-down fashion. Planned changes are management-driven, and are characterized by detailed objectives of change that are formulated in advance of the implementation process (By, 2005). Change can also be implemented through a more emergent process. Emergent changes rely more on the participation of employees and come about bottom-up. Detailed change objectives are not formulated at the beginning of the change process, but arise and evolve during the change process (By, 2005).

Change management research has traditionally been criticized for being a-contextual (Pettigrew, 1985). As argued by, Pettigrew *et al.* (2001), the context in which the change takes place continuously influences the change process, and is in turn affected by the change process itself. In order to understand and develop theory concerning organizational change in public sector organizations, it is thus necessary to incorporate the particular context of the public sector. A number of studies have suggested how the particular context of public organizations may affect the implementation process of organizational change. In a meta-analysis of the implementation of planned change in public and private organizations, Robertson and Seneviratne (1995) argue that the absence of straightforward and consensually supported goals and the divergence of stakeholder and institutional cultures may limit the success of planned change. However, Robertson and Seneviratne did not find evidence to support these expectations. Karp and Helgø (2008) argue that because of the complex character of change in the public sector, it is difficult to plan, coordinate and direct organizational change. In contrast, Burnes (2009) has argued that a planned approach to change may be better equipped to resolve conflict among the many stakeholders in the public sector during change. Some authors thus argue in favor of the planned approach to implement change in the public sector, while others argue against it. All in all, there is a lack of empirical work and previous studies are inconclusive about how change processes in public organizations are associated with environmental complexity.

*Leadership of change*

The literature on change leadership highlights the activities of a single or select number of top managers aimed at turning the organization around (Higgs and Rowland, 2005; Stewart and Kringas, 2003). The activities of change leaders typically consist of developing a future vision and an implementation plan, communicating the vision of change, being a good role model and motivating employees to contribute to the change (e.g. Fernandez and Rainey, 2006; Bass, 1999). In this study, we refer to this dominant conceptualization of change leadership as the transformational leadership perspective. Due to the specific characteristics of public organizations, public management scholars have articulated different leadership models. For example, Denis *et al.* (2005) argue that the pluralistic nature of the public sector requires leadership that is not aimed at motivation and inspiration, but rather at issues such as power, interests and coalitions. Similarly, Crosby and Bryson (2005) articulate a leadership perspective that is more about being in touch, lobbying and collaboration than about envisioning and making strategic decisions.

**Case selection and research methods**

The selected case for this study is a merger of three organizational units in the Dutch city Rotterdam. These organizational units, the Development Agency Rotterdam, the

Agency of City Construction and Housing, and the City Works Department are active in the spatial-economic development of the city. The process of change began in 2004 by improving collaboration between the organizational units. In 2011, the organizational units officially merged into a new organizational unit called Urban Development Rotterdam. We selected this case because it was expected to be “rich” in terms of environmental complexity during the change process. Both the new organization and the pre-merger organizational units are known for the multitude of societal stakeholders and external partners on which they are dependent. A number of major environmental developments, the influence of political principals and the media appeared to play an important role in the change process. Thus, we regarded the case of Urban Development Rotterdam as a good opportunity to develop insights about leading organizational change in a complex public environment. While a comparative design is often assumed to be more beneficial for testing theoretical propositions, a single case design better fits our research objective of developing theory (Flyvberg, 2006).

Qualitative methods were used for data collection. Documents such as the organization’s annual reports, reports from the organization’s work council and implementation plans were studied for background information about the case. Interviews with managers were the main source of data collection. In total, 23 interviews were conducted. Three (former) executives, five senior managers and 15 middle managers were interviewed. The objective of the interviews was to collect data about how the change process unfolded, and the role of the environment and leadership during the process. Respondents were asked about their experiences with the change process, which was followed by follow-up questions on topics such as environmental complexity, the characteristics of the change process, and leadership activities.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Atlas.ti software was used to systematically code and analyze the transcripts. Because the organizational change process was ongoing when interviews were conducted, it was possible to interview public managers about their current activities in the organizational change process. In our view, this may be beneficial to the validity of this study, because it limits the respondents’ ability for ex-post rationalization of their leadership behavior in the change process. In the transcripts, codes were assigned to the main concepts of the study. Subsequently, the connections that respondents made between concepts were coded, in order to account for the relationships between the central concepts (Corbin and Strauss, 1990).

### **Case description and analysis**

Based on our data, three phases can be identified in the organizational change process. Two important environmental developments identified by the respondents separate these phases: the Museumpark affair and the financial crisis. Each of the subsequent phases is characterized by an increase in environmental complexity. In this section, we examine the relationship between environmental complexity, the change process and leadership activities during the implementation of change.

#### *Phase 1: open-ended, local improvement of integration*

The process of organizational change can be said to have begun in 2004 in the Agency of City Construction and Housing. The unit’s executive began a process aimed at improving the integration and collaboration of their internal policy departments. This change initiative was based on the belief that a better integration of policy departments would be beneficial for the quality of public service delivery. The organizational change

process can be characterized as informal attempts of improving the integration of policies and procedures between the three units. Although the option of further adjustment in terms of organizational structure had been discussed among senior management, there were no plans of a merger at this time. Despite the open-ended character of these changes, it was perceived as a major change of direction. As a unit executive recalls:

It was the first time in 15 years that the senior managers of the City Works Department and the Agency of City Construction and Housing discussed how collaboration could be improved.

Respondents characterized the organizational change process in this phase as a natural, logical movement. Because of its incremental character and the absence of a-priori formulated change objectives, the change process closely fits with an emergent perspective on organizational change (By, 2005). Respondents recalled high commitment for the vision to enhance service delivery through improved integrality. Although the emergent perspective on change was dominant in this phase of the change process, it also had characteristics that fit the planned perspective on organizational change. For example, the change was initiated by one of the units' executives and change communication was mainly top-down. Leadership activities were mainly aimed at the internal organization. The most important activities in this phase were the initiation of the organizational change process and the envisioning of a desired future state.

#### *Phase 2: increasing pressure and limited structural integration*

In 2006 and 2007, a critical incident occurred, which we shall refer to as the Museum Park affair. This incident concerned the construction of an underground parking lot in the city (the "Museum Park"). Because of poor collaboration and communication between the units, this project was delayed by months and costs mounted from 46 million to 103 million Euros. The incident was a national media headline, taking the proportions of a sort of "Museum Parkgate" and was mockingly called the "crater flater". The incident made the fragmentation between the three organizational units unmistakably clear to the city's political executive board. What had started out as a local organizational change initiative had now evolved into a political problem. A senior manager explains:

The Museum Park affair had such a political impact; it had to have consequences for the organization.

As many of the respondents indicate, the Museum Park affair marked the beginning of a new phase in the change process. The Museum Park affair increased the sense of urgency for change among the political superiors of the organizational units. The political principals expressed the need for more resolute measures than the currently ongoing change initiative. A middle manager describes the situation:

The consequences of the "crater flater" should not be exaggerated, but it had a major effect on the organization, and it was a concrete reason to intensify the collaboration between and professionalization of the organizations. And this was picked up very seriously.

The political principals of the organization now too expressed a clear desire to resolve the problematic fragmentation between the organizational units. As a reaction to this, the move towards more synergy between the organizational units was accelerated. A shared strategic document was written which outlined a detailed vision of the

change. Not only did the organizational units work together on this, many societal stakeholders were asked to express their views on the change as well. With the strategic document, it was agreed that structural changes would be implemented in order to institutionalize the integration of processes. For example, efficiency gains could be realized through a merger of the back offices. After years of increased collaboration, a merger of the back offices of the three organizational units was initiated.

In this second phase, the change process took on more characteristics of the planned perspective on organizational change. The Museum Park affair made the sense of urgency explicit and a detailed change vision and implementation plan were formulated. Similar to phase 1, the leadership activities of the executives consisted of developing an appealing vision of change and communicating this vision to subordinates. However, because of dependencies in the political-administrative environment, the vision of change was developed in collaboration with societal stakeholders. The unit executives thus focussed more on actors outside of the organizational units. Executive managers reported collecting information from societal stakeholders as a main activity in this phase of the change process. These types of leadership activities more closely fit a network approach to leadership. With the merger of the back offices of the organizational units, the middle managers of these departments also became involved in the change process. Their activities were mainly concerned with translating the overall vision of the change to their own department. Similar to the executive managers in phase 1, the activities of middle managers closely fit the transformational leadership type in this phase.

### *Phase 3: radical change in a complex environment*

Starting in 2008, the economic crisis affected the organizational change process. Over the following years, the city was forced to implement major budget cutbacks. For the Development Agency Rotterdam and the Agency of City Construction and Housing this meant the dismissal of about a third of their 1,500 employees. Similar to the Museum Park affair, the economic crisis greatly increased the sense of urgency among employees and the political principals of the organization. As one middle manager states:

When the severity of the economic crisis and the following cutbacks in personnel became apparent, the situation turned into what is now: either sink or swim.

The crisis had major consequences for the content of the ongoing change. The focus of the change process, which had started out as an initiative to improve the quality and effectiveness of the organizational units, quickly shifted toward a focus on increasing efficiency and cutting costs. The crisis also affected the characteristics of the change process. A middle manager says:

It was a turning-point in the sense that we moved from an incremental approach, a new dot on the horizon over and over again, to a structured approach, enforced by the financial problems.

In response to the crisis, the executive managers urged their political principals to allow a full-scale merger of the organizational units. However, politicians and other municipal departments expressed hesitations concerning the size, budget and power of the desired merger. Because of this opposition, the organizational change process came to a sudden stop. A unit executive summarizes:

For a very long time, the change process was stuck in the sense that we really wanted this, but no decision was made by the board.

This stalemate complicated the implementation of change in several ways. First, while the cutbacks and layoffs required detailed change objectives, opposition in the organizational environment made it difficult to formulate a vision that was supported by all stakeholders. Second, the lack of decision making in the political-administrative arena made the change process lengthy and unstructured. While the merger of the back offices was almost completed, other departments had not even begun. Because of this, managers were no longer able to clearly communicate the change to employees.

The complex environment forced the executive managers of the organization to divide their attention between internal and external constituents. In order to get formal approval for the merger, executive managers focussed on bargaining and lobbying with external actors in the political-administrative arena. At the same time, they attempted to maintain momentum in the organization by finalizing the vision of change and explaining the environmental dependencies and developments to subordinates. Executive managers felt forced to compromise with external stakeholders in order to get approval for the merger. The city's executive board agreed that a merger of only two of the three organizational units would be allowed at that point in time. Because of this, the merger of back offices that was already underway, as well as prior communication to employees, had to be reversed.

Middle managers attempted to create support for change in their department by communicating the vision of change. However, because of the lack of decision-making and shifts in directions on the executive level, middle managers also engaged in collecting information and bargaining with internal constituents such as executive management, the organization's work council and other middle managers in order to speed up the implementation of change. Next to their transformational leadership activities already seen in the second phase of the change process, middle managers were also engaging in networking leadership activities.

In Table I, an overview of the case is given. Because our analysis reveals differences in leadership activities related to hierarchical level, we differentiate between executive managers and middle managers. Moreover, we distinguish between transformational and networking change leadership activities.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

This study was aimed at increasing our understanding of leading organizational change in a complex public environment. The first conclusion is that public managers respond to environmental complexity by adopting a more planned approach to change. In the second phase of the change process, political scrutiny on the organizational units increased as a result of a mishap in one of their projects. This forced the organizational units to intensify their processes for improving collaboration, and providing their political overseers with a more detailed course of action. In the third phase of the change process, the organizational units deemed a merger necessary in order to respond to the economic crisis. In order to overcome resistance for this merger, the executive managers had to further specify, detail and plan the organizational change, causing the change process to take on more characteristics of planned change. In both instances, we witnessed that an increase in environmental complexity induces managers to adopt a more planned approach to change.

Simultaneously, we conclude that a high degree of environmental complexity impedes the feasibility of a planned approach to organizational change. Dependencies and divergent interests in the environment of the organization make it difficult to formulate operational, uncontested change objectives that are central to the planned



Phase	Degree of environmental complexity	Leadership challenge	Leadership behavior	Leadership type
Phase 1: Open-ended, local improvement of integration	Low: Low dependence on external decision making Focus on internal processes	Initiating change and creating internal support for change	<i>Executive management</i> Stressing the need for more change on the agenda of managers and employees within the organization Creating an appealing vision of change and communicating this vision to the organization  <i>Middle management</i>	Transformational leadership  —
Phase 2: Increasing pressure and limited structural integration	Medium: Increased scrutiny by political principals Increased participation of societal stakeholders	Connecting with societal stakeholders and implementing organizational change	<i>Executive management</i> Collecting information and input from societal stakeholders Developing a shared vision and creating a vision document Communicating the vision of change to subordinate managers and employees  <i>Middle management</i> Translating the overall vision of the change to their own department	Network approach Transformational leadership Transformational leadership
Phase 3: Radical change in a complex environment	High: Divergence of external stakeholder interests Dependencies in decision making procedures	Overcoming external opposition and accelerating the implementation process	<i>Executive management</i> Lobbying and bargaining for support in the political-administrative arena Finalizing the vision of change Explaining environmental dependencies and developments to subordinates  <i>Middle management</i> Creating support for change: being a role model, translating the vision of change to their individual departments Negotiating and bargaining with internal constituents such as the organization's work council, executive management and other middle managers	Network approach Transformational leadership Transformational leadership Network approach

**Table I.**  
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approach to change. In a change process with more emergent characteristics, it is easier to avoid conflict or resolve it on the go, but in a planned change process conflict needs to be resolved before changes can be implemented (Burnes, 2009). Complexities in the environment caused the change process in our case to be lengthy and unstructured, with frequent changes in direction because of compromises with environmental stakeholders. Because of this, changes that were already underway and communication to employees had to be reversed during the process. As Haveri (2006) and Karp and Helgø (2008) argue, complexity in public sector organizational change poses a limit to rational, planned approaches to change. We formulate the following proposition:

- P1.* A high degree of environmental complexity forces public organizations to adopt a planned, top-down approach to change, while the effectiveness of such an approach to change is simultaneously limited by a complex environment.

Our analysis also shows a shift in the type of leadership activities as the environment became increasingly complex. Because of the incremental, open-ended character of the change process in the first phase, little conflict and dependencies arose in the organizational environment. Leadership activities were mainly focussed on the internal organization and fit the transformational leadership perspective that is dominant in much of the literature on change leadership (Fernandez and Rainey, 2006). As the environment became more complex, the leadership activities of managers became more externally focussed. In the second phase of the organizational change process, the unit executives started to span the boundaries of the organization in order to collect information from societal stakeholders. In the third phase of the change process, networking leadership activities became necessary to overcome environmental dependencies and opposition. Although transformational change leadership activities remain present during the implementation process, the leadership activities of both executive managers and middle managers became more aimed at collecting information, negotiating and compromising in order to keep the implementation of change going.

These findings resonate with prior studies. For instance, Haveri (2006) states that organizational change in local government requires leadership aimed at political consensus. Kickert (2010, p. 490) argues that change in public organizations calls for “complex network management”. Moore and Hartley (2008) state that change management in government goes beyond organizational boundaries and takes place in networks. We share the view that the role of leadership is central to overcome the challenges posed by a complex environment in times of organizational change. In order to effectively lead change in environmental complexity, transformational leadership is a necessary condition, but not a sufficient condition. The complex environment of public organizations calls for additional, networking leadership activities aimed at the external environment. We formulate the following proposition:

- P2.* With increasing environmental complexities, internally focussed transformational leadership is accompanied by a network approach of leadership.

Our study is subject to some limitations. First, we distinguished between environment, change processes and leadership activities, whereas the boundaries between the external environment and internal organization are in some sense arbitrary or fluid. Second, the order in which we presented our results may have given the impression that causality between these concepts exists and exclusively in this order. However, we emphasize that the concepts are interrelated. The behavior of organizational actors is

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not only influenced by the environment, but it continuously shapes its environment as well (Pettigrew *et al.*, 2001).

We conclude with drafting directions for future research based on our findings. A first recommendation for future research is to test the two propositions in other organizational contexts and/or regarding diverse types of organizational change for the purpose of external validity. A second recommendation for future research is to expand the focus of this study to other specific characteristics of public organizations. For example, the role of the specific motivational bases of civil servants (Wright *et al.*, 2013) or that of the bureaucratic organizational structure (Van der Voet, 2014) on the implementation of change in public organizations.

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