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Public sector work intensification and negative behaviors

Work
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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore issues associated with sector specific change in the Australian Public Service (APS). Evidence is presented on the impact of New Public Management (NPM) on work intensification and subsequent negative behaviors by giving voice to APS employees who were subject to the NPM changes.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected from APS employees, human resource managers and policy makers across 11 agencies on the nature of the changes, context of work, and workplace interactions. The study adopted a triangulated mixed method interpretivist approach using a survey instrument, stories, focus groups, and interviews.

Findings – The NPM changes were aimed at creating a more professional and accountable APS. This resulted in individual agencies pursuing different approaches to productivity and efficiency while being accountable to the public and the government within a tight regulatory framework. These changes created competing priorities, affected the nature of the work through intensification, and fueled workplace tensions, thus affecting progress toward the goals of NPM.

Practical implications – The findings of this study will be useful in alerting organizational leaders of possible unintended negative consequences of poorly implemented change programs.

Originality/value – This current study provides evidence that the negative behaviors which arise from the implementation of efficiency focussed change can be damaging to individuals, the nature of work, and therefore organizations and the outcomes sought. Many change management activities in the public sector can lead to negative behaviors if implemented in a way lacking in respect for staff.

Keywords Public sector, Change, Work intensification, Negative behaviors,
New public management (NPM)

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The 1980s saw the advent of New Public Management (NPM) (Hood, 1995) in the western world as part of a movement toward privatization and an increased focus on productivity in public sector organizations. The aim was to lift the sector to be more accountable, flexible, efficient, effective, service oriented, and transparent through measurable outcomes (Anderson *et al.*, 2003; Norman and Gregory 2003). The realization of efficiencies increased competition within the sector, as well as against the private and nonprofit sectors. NPM aimed to facilitate its ability to compete in this increasingly fast paced and turbulent environment through modernization.

Schneider and Barsoux (2003, p. 312) speak of the emergence of a “means justify the ends attitude” in competitive, high-pressure settings where the focus is on deliverables and outputs. The move away from strong and stable cultures, for example in the public



sector, can result in fertile grounds for conflict and negative interactions, with the propensity for conflict being positively correlated with behaviors such as workplace bullying (Baillien and De Witte, 2009). A Scandinavian study found elevated rates of negative behaviors and victimization for public sector employees and attributed its origins to public sector changes (Salin, 2001).

This paper reports some of the findings of a larger study of sector specific change and associated behaviors in the Australian Public Service (APS). It specifically focusses on the impact of NPM on work intensification and subsequent negative behaviors. With management of change in the APS as a backdrop, this paper will provide evidence of these changes on the nature of public sector work and employee reactions. The findings will contribute to a better understanding of some of the possible unintended negative consequences of the management of change on work and people; and offer strategies to mitigate these consequences and optimize success.

Ecology of the sector

Changes to the public sector environment and the advent of NPM can be seen in much of the English speaking world: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, the US (Caverley, 2005; Norman and Gregory, 2003), and beyond (e.g. Azzone and Palermo, 2011; Salin, 2001). New Zealand research on the implementation of NPM reported a strong focus on measurable, financial, and short-term outcomes (Norman and Gregory, 2003), posing questions for sustainability and implications of the changes. In Australia, the changes were facilitated through financial and legislative reforms enacted through the Public Service and Workplace Relations Acts (Anderson *et al.*, 2002b). Curtin (2000) contends that the search for cost efficient outcomes jeopardized the key pillars of the public sector by shifting the focus to customers (Hoque and Moll, 2001), intensifying public scrutiny and creating fluid performance expectations, thus increasing political interference (Caverley, 2005). Such interactions exerted pressures on public sector managers to deliver outcomes, changing work and performance dynamics, and ultimately affecting workplace interactions. Diefenbach (2009, p. 905) provides evidence of a “range of negative psycho-social and organizational effects” as a result of NPM.

Many of the key challenges for the public sector now reflect that of the private sector resulting in the need to implement changes to: achieve a flexible, intellectually agile workforce; attract and retain staff in a tightening labor market; plan for more diverse career patterns; and develop future leaders (Boxall and Purcell, 2011; Lamond, 2005). One aspect of the change is the need to do more with less, inevitably leading to the need for increased flexibility and work intensification (Kelliher and Anderson, 2010).

The notion of a flexible and responsive public sector may be perceived as an oxymoron. On one hand there is a push to be in tune with business and social trends and therefore responsive, on the other, the sector is bound by the shackles of regulation, bureaucracy, inflexible structures, and associated policies and practices. Reconciling this tension fuelled many of the questions underlying this research project. Can the public sector be as flexible, responsive, and agile as its competitors? What are the mechanisms through which this can be achieved? How will it affect work in the public service? Will there be negative unintended consequences in terms of workplace behaviors?

The public sector has traditionally had an image of being less effective and influential than the private sector (Halligan, 2005) with emphasis on efficiency rather than outputs and outcomes (Cooper and Atkins, 2005). The work environment is considered to be highly structured and bureaucratic, have low flexibility, an internal

focus, and a preoccupation with conformity and enforcement of rules (Bradley and Parker, 2006); all factors which create power differentials (Crawford, 1997).

In addition, individual agencies have strong histories, traditions, functions, and types of business. While there are pressures for conformity across the sector, there are also demands for flexibility via more discretionary management decision-making processes (Anderson *et al.*, 2002a). Having to reconcile these complexities can result in a lack of clarity in measuring the quality and quantity of work (Hubert and van Veldhoven, 2001). Given more managerial authority, an individual's status and worth is therefore influenced by the strength of their interpersonal relationships with those in the hierarchy. Delivering efficiency dividends through cost cutting was a significant part of early NPM changes and was often preceded by intensified performance management practices (Ironside and Seifert, 2003) to focus on deliverables and results. The NPM performance driven culture of the public sector has had its critics (e.g. Anderson *et al.*, 2002b, p. 14; Goss, 2001, p. 4). The irreconcilable pressures above are compounded by characteristics such as low job mobility coupled with relatively high job security (Zapf, 2001) and a demand for high level customer service (Di Martino *et al.*, 2003). Public servants are often exposed to high risk workplace interactions, often in intense environments. The modernized public sector is characterized by many of the factors which have been found to lead to power struggles (Strandmark and Hallberg, 2007); heightened stress (Hauge *et al.*, 2010); and negative behaviors such as workplace bullying.

In moving away from traditional conditions of employment, NPM is characterised by tighter deadlines and increased pace of work (Felstead *et al.*, 2012), with some reporting "excessive monitoring and unmanageably high workloads" (Brunetto *et al.*, 2014). This work intensification along with greater managerial discretion can lead to negative workplace interactions which can erode the professional image, productivity, and efficiency dividends sought.

Study design

The focus on negative workplace interactions in the APS presented unique challenges given limited previous research on public sector environments, especially in Australia. This paper reports some of the findings of a larger study of workplace behaviors in the APS. Data were collected on the context of work, changes in the public sector and workplace interactions from APS employees through 219 completed and returned surveys, three focus groups with 28 participants, 54 stories, and five semi structured interviews with human resource (HR) managers and policy makers across 11 agencies. APS employees who were verbally or formally accused of being bullies were also invited to contribute in the study, ten alleged perpetrators volunteered to participate in unstructured interviews to provide an in-depth account of the situation and their experience.

A mixed method interpretivist approach (Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2011) was employed. The two-part survey collected information on the context of work and negative workplace interactions and had a response rate of 37 percent. The first part collected quantitative data on the organizational setting (culture and climate), while the second free-response section sought descriptions of negative behaviors experienced in the workplace. Qualitative data were also collected from participants through focus groups, semi-structured, and in-depth interviews.

The analytical approach adopted was designed to acknowledge the high level of subjectivity associated with perceptions of workplace bullying. Derived from Locke's (2001)

model, a modified form of grounded theory development was adopted which moved iteratively between coding, analysis and review. At each stage emerging themes were checked back against the original data for verification to ensure theory was “fully grounded in participants’ experiences’ (Birks and Mills, 2011, p. 121).

Results and discussion

Findings suggest that work intensification associated with NPM manifests itself in three ways: increased pressures and controls; changes to resources; and cultural change; each will be discussed in turn. The voices of the participants provide illustrative examples of the nature, causes and impact of these manifestations.

Increased pressures and controls

Study participants suggested that NPM changes were at times “confronting,” some went as far as seeing them as “a systematic attack by the organization.” Managers were reporting that they had been “pushed and stretched from the application of the efficiency dividend” and what this had resulted in the erosion of “flexibility. Such moves were seen to create tensions in the workplace with more pressure on managers to be on the front foot with respect to absenteeism.”

One manager reported: “There is a lot of pressure in balancing the department’s requirements or people’s requirements because every decision you make is worth money, and people look at that.” Another respondent indicated that they were confused by “inconsistent expectations” and had been subjected to “constant criticisms [...] continual monitoring, checking, watching, communication problems, and constant pressure.” Such negative workplace behaviors shook the very foundation of NPM and were seen to jeopardize its success and the very reason it was implemented. The quote below from a policy maker is evidence that the implementation of NPM raced ahead of appropriate change management strategies to win hearts and minds, and ensure success:

Cultural change was required because it was a new way of accounting and reporting within the Public Service. People didn’t think of outcomes they only ever thought about outputs. They didn’t know what the outputs were actually leading to [...] But now people have to see the bigger picture [...] So we’ve got a little bit of budget funding but we’ve got to generate revenue so we can balance the books at the end of the day. A lot of the staff who previously worked in the organization didn’t feel very comfortable about working on a cost recovery basis [...] staff [...] don’t always feel comfortable saying to people, “yeah please come along, but we have to charge you \$xx to do that.”

Changes to resources

Increased workplace pressures and controls were seen to have an impact on the number, nature and skill base of public sector employees. Study participants reported changes to their work including: “higher accountability” and “increased need for improved performance and meeting targets.” Accompanied by “flattening of organizational structures” and “structured work environments resulting in less flexibility,” staff were now required to “do more with less.” Participants reported that they no longer “have enough people to do [the work].”

Increased accountability and reduced resources were seen to be causing employees to work “harder and smarter.” As the public sector has been traditionally characterized by low job mobility and long organizational tenure, the existing workforce was seen by some as being incapable of change. Study participants reported that increasingly

robust performance management practices were being used to ensure alignment. The view was expressed that managers and staff had not been appropriately skilled for this undertaking: "This performance management environment that we are trying to advance within the Public Service [...] a lot of people aren't very good at giving and receiving feedback," "but that's no excuse to act this way." Where the new performance management systems were linked to pay, further depersonalization was observed. A reluctance to deal with conflict was also evident, along with a general tendency to fit performance management outcomes to a bell curve, thus introducing bias.

Respondents also reported an apparent shift in the required skill sets of employees toward a more task-orientated approach reflecting a "change in the psychology of the organisation [...] [from] people and soft skills [...] to the more technical skills because of the environment." Another respondent referred to the shift from customer service to regulatory enforcement "and that causes [...] some struggle about what kind of individuals you have working for [the organization]." It seemed that the shift in valued skill sets was favoring more task-orientated individuals, and, given the reported lack of training in soft skills, the environments created were becoming confrontational in nature.

Cultural change

Increased pressures and controls, and changes to the level and nature of resourcing, seemed to be creating tensions within established public sector, and agency cultures. The following quotes represent these tensions: "Long-term APS employees are expecting the younger ones to be much more compliant and do as they are told," and "I avoided the "older" areas of the office where the attitude is more entrenched." Study respondents referred to a "previously 'non-interventionist approach', now [becoming] more hands-on and involved [...] [with a] new culture less accommodating of non-conformity." There was reference to "old versus new APS values and ideals," and "creating a stable culture, old public service style, and resistance to "differences" and change." One respondent indicated: "It is a new workplace culture. I don't think there has been anywhere near enough work done on how to deal with that tension."

The move to a performance focussed and service orientated culture took many out of their comfort zone. As culture is by nature stable and entrenched (Cameron and Quinn, 2011), respondents indicated that in order to adopt NPM significant shifts happened through policies, procedures and the new legislative framework. One respondent described the changes as:

What they wanted was to be like the private sector and that was given to them but in a very values based framework [...] the values really relate to the APS as a culture [...] we have a Code of Conduct [...] agencies really can do what they want to.

The legacy of NPM, where the public service is to be seen as a business that needs to be competitive, productive, and economically viable is reflected in the words of one respondent: "I don't think it's all that easy in terms of priorities for the organization. I suppose we have a business to run and our people are an important component of that but they are only one component of the business." This view is echoed by other literature (e.g. Brunetto and Farr-Wharton, 2005).

Negative behaviors. Work intensification has negative repercussions for interpersonal relations with possible escalation to workplace bullying. Zapf *et al.* (2003, p. 118) consider bullying to be a particular problem among white-collar workers and service employees, with the risks higher for those in the public administration,

social, health, and education sectors. Some respondents indicated that their large and diversified APS organisations worked in silos, with varying norms and practices. Constant movement across these silos and between APS organisations often resulted in individuals entering sub-cultures where they did not fit. For change agents this often resulted in hostile reactions; for others, isolation and exclusion. Caverley (2005, p. 401) observed that bullying arises in public sector work environments from “continually shifting performance expectations and media/public scrutiny.” Di Martino *et al.* (2003, pp. 16-21) found that workplaces with a high customer service orientation were associated with high incidence of negative behaviors, and public administration and government have been found to be high-risk settings for unpleasant interactions (Hubert and van Veldhoven, 2001). This might be attributed to the ambiguities associated with measuring work performance thus making interpersonal relationships important in establishing one’s worth and status. Conflicting interests are common in these environments, as is the potential for political activity in performance management (Azzone and Palermo, 2011; Spence and Keeping, 2011). Power differentials in the public sector (Crawford, 1997) create potential for abuse, with role conflict, job insecurity, and increased workloads being recognised antecedents of negative behaviors such as bullying (Notelaers *et al.*, 2010). The association of work intensification with direct and indirect negative behaviors was evident in the responses to this study discussed below.

Direct negative behaviors

The direct negative behaviors reported by respondents were categorized into verbal comments and other inappropriate behaviors. Verbal comments were made to the respondent or to others in the workplace. These included: “Threat of dismissal if I didn’t meet a target,” “General put-downs, being ridiculed and laughed at,” “Speaking to me in a derogatory manner in front of other co-workers,” and “use of obscene language.” Other comments were made behind the target’s back: “Backstabbing and comments made to co-workers [...] to the point of vicious vindictiveness that had co-workers warning me to watch my back,” “lying about me,” and “gossip and speculation.”

Four main behavioral tactics were also identified as direct negative behaviors: exclusion, aggression, undermining, and implication. Exclusion of the target involved leaving them out of work or social functions, or withholding information, for example, “Having lunches that excluded myself” and “avoidance and not including me in group interactions.” Aggression included: “threatening,” “hostile questioning,” “yelling” or “slamming chairs and throwing bags.” Undermining targets involved: “lies to manager,” “incorrect instructions/directions,” and “[...] undermining my authority with junior staff.” Negative behaviors by implication took a range of forms including: “Eye rolling [...] in front of peers and superiors in meetings,” and in an extreme case: “photo of suspect rapist pinned upon noticeboard with suggestions that it was a likeness to me.”

Indirect negative behaviors

Targets were also affected by indirect behaviors which disrupted their work, and created negative experiences. Disruptions involved excessive pressure or creation of discomfort and instability: “unachievable expectation of performance fuelled by continual criticism” and “continued pressure to meet unrealistic targets.” Discomfort and instability were identified in comments such as: “lack of support, threat of removal

from team,” “my way or the highway style” and “made to feel vulnerable.” Many of these negative behaviors were reported by staff who were not secure in their employment.

The workplace experience of targets included misuse of organizational procedures: “abuse of position power,” “managerial use of APS Code of Values (sic) as a tool of punishment,” and “trying to influence merit based selections.” Targets also experienced being denied fair treatment: “[taking] The worst view possible of my actions and not listening or [...] even asking for my explanation,” and “not [being] believed by supervisor.”

The direct and indirect negative behaviors were either visible and targeted at individuals, or subtle and affecting the work environment and the quality of work life of employees. Both were disruptive and at times legitimized through the use of organizational procedures.

Implications for research and practice. Increasing work pressures are an integral aspect of any work environment, including that of the public sector. The sudden nature of the changes in the APS required agencies to move quickly in order to deliver new outcomes in the name of NPM. This may have left some managers recruited under the old culture unable to cope with the nature and pace of change, and therefore having to resort to inappropriate tactics to achieve the required outcomes at great cost. One respondent had the following to say: “The General kicks the Colonel and then all down the way, the Private gets his poor old arse kicked.” Such comments indicate that the negative behaviors were seen to be institutionalized with existing codes and policies being used as drivers for change. In the APS, the quest for a more professional and accountable Service resulted in individual agencies pursuing different approaches to productivity and efficiency while being accountable within a tight regulatory framework. These forces for change created competing priorities, often fuelling tensions and negating the positive outcomes sought as a result of NPM.

Miller and Rayner (2012) contend that negative behaviors such as workplace bullying may take different forms depending on the strength and nature of an organization’s culture. The evidence presented in this paper gives voice to the individuals who experienced the changes associated with NPM. The practical significance of such evidence is to alert managers and policy makers to the possibility that negative behaviors can be indirect as well as direct, and can involve implication or exclusion rather than always being active. Einarsen and Mikkelsen (2003, p. 139) emphasize the impact of exclusion: “as a social and tribal primate, the survival of human beings depends on their being integrated in a well-functioning social group.” Kisamore *et al.* (2010) found that social competencies interact with interpersonal conflict to predict the likelihood of negative behaviors and workplace abuse. Employees perceive negative behaviors to go beyond aggressive language to a wide range of actions and avoidances of action. Many change management activities may be seen as negative behaviors if implemented in a way lacking in respect for staff, or not being inclusive or consultative.

Poorly planned and implemented change, rigid work practices and arrangements, and narrow interpretation of rules of conduct by public sector managers may compound conflicts in an already volatile environment. With NPM changes in the APS, managers gained far more discretion, magnifying disagreements or personality clashes. Organizational procedures such as performance management were expected to resolve these issues, but were often poorly implemented and created environments that appeared to condone and facilitate negative behaviors. There appeared to be a fine line between managerial authority in the name of “operational efficiency” and performance

management, making it possible to overstep the boundary between practices acceptable to employees and those perceived as heavy-handed. Here, the culture, context, and history of individual agencies was an important backdrop. While the APS Codes of Conduct and Values apply to all officers, individual agency cultures formed a lens through which these codes and values were interpreted.

Organizations seeking to reduce negative behaviors and bullying must be cognizant of the significant role of power differentials, and should seek to reduce it by training managers, and supporting them to deal more appropriately with power. Such a model of public sector management would be based on leadership. Here, unlike traditional management, power is less based on formal positional or expertise power and more on power “authority” and human relationships resulting in respect.

In summary, there was strong evidence that NPM principles had created major changes in the APS environment. However, in most cases, change management strategies were not completely effective in addressing individual or organizational needs. Many of the solutions proposed in this paper require a review of change management strategies to achieve; open communication, inclusive processes, and alignment between structural, procedural, and cultural pillars of the organization. The HR function can also play a key role in addressing these needs through appropriate workforce planning; effective job redesign; appropriate recruitment, and selection practices; the provision of skilling; appropriate and consistent performance management practices; and creating safe and healthy work environments in which diversity is valued, and dignity and respect exist for all.

Conclusion

The new public sector presents challenges and pressures for systems established in another era. In the Australian context, NPM sought increased flexibility at the agency level, moving toward more discretionary managerial decision-making with the ultimate aim of delivering better outcomes for the public sector (Anderson *et al.*, 2003, p. 2). The rise of NPM increased the public sector need for flexibility, responsiveness, accountability, and transparency, necessitating a new world order: a major shift for a public service that by nature and legislation had been stable for a good part of the last century. Such significant changes are bound to erode the historical power base of many. This appears to have resulted in increasingly intense and at times toxic workplaces, and a quest for survival by some through the use of negative behaviors.

This paper presents clear evidence that the quest for modernization and competition inherent in NPM, if not properly planned and implemented, can have unintended adverse outcomes, thus jeopardizing the very reason for their inception. The APS and many Australian state public sector agencies continue to be subject to significant change, and this evidence is a timely reminder to be cognizant of the potential impact of change on individuals and on their interaction within organizations. The vision for the future must be clearly articulated in the public agencies along with the ways in which organizations should move forward and implement change. An integrated and strategic plan, including that of appropriate human resource plans, practices, and policies, is required for successful shifts in organizations. Change management strategies should also be based on a clear understanding of the current and desired state, and the way in which this gap is to be bridged. Special attention must be paid to the impacts of changes on existing and future staff with reference to structures and relationships, technical and soft skills, policies and people.

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