

Transition Management: A Redefined Role for Public Managers



One thing is certain these days ... change is imminent. It is at the forefront of each political platform; it is driving the establishment of new international economic and geopolitical patterns; and it is the singular ingredient that is both shaping and challenging the evolution of this country's social climate. Perhaps never again in our lifetimes will the causes and effects of change be so apparent and, simultaneously, so anxiety producing.

Almost 20 years ago the advent of New Federalism signaled the growing acceptance by federal officials and politicians that true development must find its genesis at the local level. More critically, lasting change and contribution only occur when conceived and nurtured at their source. If given the opportunity, cities and counties can indeed analyze, plan, and implement successful programs that meet much more directly the needs of constituents. Is this a particularly new phenomenon? Certainly not. There has always existed the view that we know what is best for us. Given the option and opportunity, we will satisfy our own needs and prefer to do so. The extension is clear. Local government is well aware of its collective mission and complex challenges. It lives daily with the visible reminders of poverty, the homeless, environmental concerns, transportation problems, education costs, social conflict, economic diversity, and the growing specter of AIDS.

**Opening New
Avenues for
Growth and
Development**

John F. Luthy

Managing Change

Managing change and the concept of transition management is what this article is about. Warren G. Bennis et al. provided sound methods and procedures in *The Planning of Change* as far back as 1961. But the prescription for change planning and management often fails to consider that government tends to be reactive rather than proactive. At best, it can successfully predict what will most likely occur, and budget accordingly. But reality tends to alter even the wisest intervention, generally resulting in reactive programs to stem the tide.

Until recently, transition management was narrowly defined as when elected or appointed executives leave a position and how those left behind manage in the interim. Also, much has been written on how a manager transitions from one position to another. In this narrow context, however, transitions of this nature can not reflect the true value of change as an opportunity for organizational growth and development.

Studies conducted by the Executive Management Development Institute have evoked a much broader view of transition management as a critical element of continuous organizational reform and renewal that is more in keeping with the current trend in public sector reform.

Transition management provides a forum for change—the planned, thoughtful renewal of organizations at all levels. It opens, naturally, new avenues for development and growth in all organizations at all levels. It opens, naturally, new avenues for development and growth in all organizations, whether public or private. Transitions provide a period when insight is keenest, when energies flow and when creativity at all levels is generated.

Local government administrators today are much more than custodians or caretakers in the evolution of our cities and counties. They are

keepers of the watch, and their watch is during difficult and trying times. They must assess and analyze the challenges, and not only create wholly new strategies, but also develop new and innovative means of implementation.

Even if only rhetorically, questions of great import must be asked of all public managers. What is your mindset during your watch? What set of values is guiding your decisions? What perspective is most appropriate, and has it been internalized so that it offers ample insight and energy to meet the challenges you face?

Transitions as Windows of Opportunity

If administrators accept the idea that change is continual, then the concept of transition becomes more clear. Transitions are merely changes from one thing to another. A new planning method, a new management information system, a new executive or senior manager, industry moving into or away from the local government, new rules or policies or laws, etc., all require transitions. The more systematized the transition, the more positive its impact on the organization.

Transition management is a process of managing change, rather than a program. It is a method, much like zero-based budgeting or Program Evaluation and Review Technique (PERT). As such, it can be learned by managers as a principal tool in contemporary public management. Transition management brings both a philosophical understanding of what we are about, and the methodology for compartmentalizing change into manageable increments. With it, continuous change is systematized, thus fostering planned growth and organizational renewal. This distinction makes managing transitions a critically important element of public sector management that has become partic-

ularly valuable for management teams in our cities and counties. This is truly where the buck stops—where change immediately impacts the lives of people.

Three Types of Transitions

Research and experience equally support the identification of three basic types of transitions. With each comes the opportunity to analyze current status, strengthen management leadership, determine new goals and objectives, and develop implementation strategies that will help ensure success.

Leadership Change. Whenever a manager assumes a new position he or she has the opportunity to create significant transitions. Rarely, however, do new managers know how to effectively do so. Instead, they address the most apparent elements of the job, rather than the aspects of the organization that will bring about the most valuable and lasting contributions.

Properly done, transitioning from one manager or management team to another provides an opportunity for the entire organization to examine itself and assess its strengths, weaknesses, goals, mission, and values. During this type of transition the organization can refocus on how it meets its charter—how it accomplishes its purpose.

Turnover among government officials, whether elected or appointed, is a natural transition offering new levels of development, both internal and external. Unfortunately, most transitions of this nature have very little substantive guidance, and new managers often find that the most important elements of the job are unrelated to the activities that capture most of their time.

The greatest concern of any new manager must be to assess the current status of the organization—its latent power, its values, its collective will

to cooperate and collaborate, and its dedication to its mission. Only through such an assessment can a starting point for a planned transition be established. Such a "stake in the ground" delineates the current position, and in so doing energizes the organization and its members to redefine the position to which it aspires. Based on both external and internal needs and expectations, a planned transition can then be defined, planned, and implemented as a potent contribution of the new administration, responding directly to the needs of its constituents.

Crisis—Internal and External. It could be argued that most change, not all of it good, occurs as a result of crisis. Whether internal or external to the organization, crisis demands our attention, and consequently our limited resources.

Although a worn cliché, every problem does indeed offer opportunities. Not all difficult conflicts or crises result in significant benefit, but conflict/crisis management in my view represents a transition to be managed for the good of the community.

Crisis catalyzes change. Too simplistic? Consider that:

- Crises offer an opportunity to explore existing values, goals, mission, priorities, and strategies.
- A crisis opens lines of communication and negotiation perhaps otherwise closed or unknown.
- Crises provide a reality check for managers, elected officials, and constituents.
- Points of view, loyalties, belief systems, and latent constituencies become apparent during crises.
- Well-prepared managers and administrative teams often turn a crisis or conflict into an opportunity to create totally new options for the community.

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a proactive process of transitioning from one status to another, and not simply a case of being driven helplessly before an imposing conflict or difficult circumstance. Regardless of the catalyst, proper diagnosis provides the cornerstones for prudent decisions. Because local government consistently faces critical situations, skillful public managers must master the art of assessing, analyzing, planning, and implementing reform strategies that use various forms of crisis to achieve positive program and organizational development.

Planned Change. In his recent book, *The Renewal Factor*, Bob Waterman discusses the strength of "informed opportunists." According to Waterman, planning remains important, but its nature is being redefined to accommodate the accelerated pace of change. Surveys conducted by Waterman indicate that strategic planning has lost its glitter because,

very simply, it was conceived as a process to guide development through a system of milestones. And even with flexibility factored in, the system by itself is far too cumbersome to keep pace with dynamic, constantly renewing organizations and their constituencies. Certainly, basic goals and objectives remain relevant, as do financial parameters, but we now are shifting to a new perspective.

Private and public managers are being asked more frequently to transition to new methods, procedures, materials, codes, locations, etc., often allowing very little time for advanced planning. Powerful forces are converging to challenge current systems, procedures, rules, regulations, policies and beliefs. This has led the more enlightened senior managers to empower department and program managers with the latitude to make changes based on new information or circumstance and to follow more progressive thinking. Importantly, the underlying question central to total quality management—How can we do it better?—also drives transition planning. This basic tenet of total quality management is one of the most important by-products of properly conducted transition planning. And, like total quality programs, it is defined by dynamism, collaboration, open communication, and proactive thinking.

Shifting Imperatives

Peter Drucker, in the September/October 1992 issue of *Harvard Business Review*, noted, "For managers, the dynamics of knowledge impose one clear imperative: every organization has to build the management of change into its very structure."

One of the Institute's affiliates, Dr. Bill Kearley, early last year spent four weeks in Washington, D.C., as a Kellogg Foundation Fellow. His report was both inspiring and disturbing. Throughout federal agencies there exists a recognition and acceptance

that wholesale changes must occur in how services are provided and managed. Restructuring to accommodate change produces extreme anxiety especially when many, even at senior management levels, openly admit to having only a vague idea of how to analyze, plan, and implement transitions to new methods, systems, and procedures.

In his article, Drucker emphasized that every organization must devote itself to creating the new. To accomplish this he suggests that the following three practices become part of the cultural fiber of any organization:

- Continuously improve everything the organization does.
- Learn to exploit the organization's knowledge in order to develop the next generation of applications from its own successes.
- Learn to innovate—but innovate using an organized systematic process.

In today's complex society, organizations can not function simply with boss and subordinate roles. They must operate as a team. Certainly, management must retain overall authority, but its role is not simply to command; it is to inspire and facilitate. While this is in keeping with contemporary theory, few elected or appointed managers transitioning to new positions ever seek assistance in creating a communicative, collaborative, loyal team at the outset. Without guidance, this process usually takes months or even years, and often is fraught with considerable disharmony. Research also indicates there are few administrations or agency or department managers who have the inclination to establish standard practices for responding to or planning for continual change.

A Systems Solution

The process of transition management is a systems approach to public

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management. The complexity of the challenges facing local government today tends to undermine confidence and responsibility for improvement. Systems thinking is a method for understanding the various components that underlie complex situations. Every circumstance involves a point of departure (status) and an intended, desired destination (new status). The secret to systems thinking and transition management is seeing interrelationships rather than strict cause-effect relationships, as processes of change for which administrators are responsible for planning and implementing.

Of particular note, one of the most profound examples of the value of interrelationships produced by a systems approach is the natural increase in program/product *quality*, higher organizational *productivity*, and the emergence of greater *leadership* capability among staff at all levels. This occurs naturally, without special programs to develop these specific characteristics in the organization.

A properly trained management team facing a major transition, regardless of its nature or source, will have responses and outcomes that promote the administration's overall capacity to perform and continually refine its capabilities. Such an administration is characterized by consistent progress toward the goals of the community, and retains the ability to meet each new challenge with clear direction and keen insight.

The New Culture of Change

If administrators accept as obvious that the pace of change will continue to accelerate, then they also must accept the challenge to prepare for it. Trends, particularly those spanning two decades, provide reasonable foundations for prediction. That our cities and counties now are faced with increasing demands on limited resources is an inescapable conclusion. Environmental, social, and economic

problems will increasingly require local solutions without the benefit of adequate federal funds or prescriptions for successful remediation.

In this decade, local governments will face more cumulative crises than at any other time in the past 50 years. Incremental deterioration in the economy, transportation infrastructure, health care, and environmental quality, coupled with continuing federal budget deficits and one percent initiatives, will force local management teams to contend with complex problems that were years in the making. Faced with the dichotomy of shrinking revenues and increased demand/expectations, public managers are still expected to react quickly with efficient answers to enormously difficult challenges.

It is my belief that public managers must be introduced to and become familiar with a new organization culture that is generally characterized by change management. Transitions will occur at a blinding pace, often becoming apparent without warning or time to prepare. The skill of public managers—all their collective training and experience—becomes unproductive unless effectively brought to bear on the work at hand.

The process of transition management is, I believe, an essential tool for public sector leaders and managers. Through it, the process of change, with all its complexity and challenge, becomes manageable and ultimately beneficial. More importantly, it provides direction, responsiveness and clarity to difficult situations regardless of origin or scope. There are new patterns and approaches continuously emerging in management science. Experience and research has convinced us this one is worth consideration. **LSM**

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