

The Journal of Values-Based Leadership

Manuscript 1475

Book Review: Practical Innovation in Government: How Front-Line Leaders Are Transforming Public-Sector Organizations

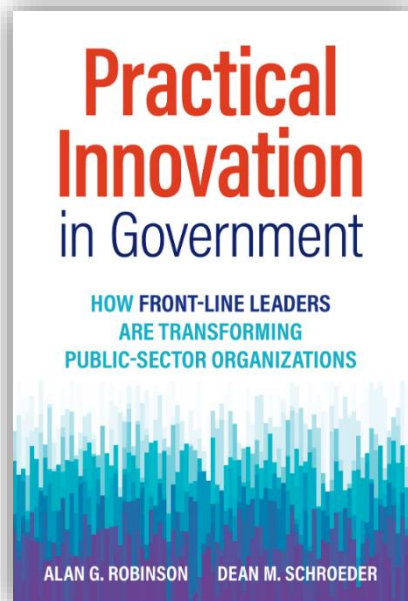
Elizabeth Gingerich

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/jvbl>



Part of the [Business Commons](#)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Business at ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Values-Based Leadership by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at scholar@valpo.edu.



Title:

Practical Innovation in Government: How Front-Line Leaders Are Transforming Public-Sector Organizations

Co-Authors:

Alan G. Robinson and Dean M. Schroeder

Publisher:

Berrett-Koehler Publishers

Reviewer:

Elizabeth Gingerich, JVBL Editor

Pages: 256

Publication Date:

July 19, 2022

ISBN-10 152300178X

Overview

The functions and policies of managerial leaders have been continuously studied, evaluated, and reformed. Actions regarding the streamlining the organization's workforce, improving the company's services and/or products, or curtailing unnecessary expenses are routinely implemented – primarily to increase the entity's overall economic performance. Public-sector companies are, however, more commonly associated with multiple stakeholders, excessive paperwork, and unnecessary personnel. Managerial performance is traditionally viewed as salient only when public ire is generated through reports of abuse of power and resources. One would normally not expect examples of leadership performance in government offices. Yet authors Alan G. Robinson and Dean M. Schroeder have researched a plethora of such public-sector examples of managerial prowess which are explored and summarized – and ultimately offered to the private-sector world as a possible roadmap of organizational efficacy.

Introduction

“Government bureaucracy” is a phrase that typically elicits a negative reaction from most people. However, irrespective of whether people desire more or less government, everybody would ostensibly desire better efficiency in governmental operations. Whereas traditional thinking would use running a private business as an exemplar for governing entities to follow, the dissimilarities are emphasized in the book. These authors find that private sector approaches to continuous and sustainable improvement do not necessarily work well in the public sector. Rather than upper management defining the improvement process with the aid of highly-paid consultants – as is usually the hallmark of private business – substantive change is often front-line initiated and front-line driven.

Front-Line Worker Emphasis

Supervisors and low-level managers drive the focus of this book; continuous improvement (CI) initiatives are dominated by this workforce sector. The authors provide the reader with an

analysis of a 6-year, 5-country study of 75 government organizations and how CI is achieved therein. The front-line leaders studied had developed a nuanced understanding of how their behavior and problem-solving approaches affected their support by superiors. A common denominator was that – from a licensing department in Colorado to the court system in provincial Canada, front-line workers learned that real improvement takes time and patience. Many understood that idea departments would have to be developed outside worktime, and on their own personal schedules. Such leaders knew that before any changes could be implemented, the projected consequences of each such desired reform would have to be identified and examined in their totality.

Successful front-line workers understand the primary leverage points needed to sell an improvement agenda to upper management. They understand when change is needed, they must first create a vision of how such reform will be accomplished. To expedite change process, they know that training is necessary and communication with superiors essential. In return, upper management must respond with encouragement and the permission to explore, acknowledging that the usual cut-and-control tactics are no longer viable. It is this intrinsic motivation of front-line workers that must be embraced by the government entity proper. All employees also must weigh the projected impact of change implementation and be engaged in the improvement process. It is only logical, then, to tap into those within the workforce who have primary dealings with the client or customer and as a result, are best able to note and address the problems repeatedly experienced.

Authentic change requires that front-line leaders continuously interact with their subordinates on a regular basis and in a substantive and non-obsequious way. For it is relationship-building that connotes long-term improvement and necessary change. Developing ideas generated by front-line leaders must emanate from a variety of perspectives and intrinsic motivation must continuously be supported from above. This can best be achieved by serving a greater good – a collective goal, possessing (or acquiring) the necessary skills and knowledge to effect such desired impact, and the autonomy to make decisions independently of high-level superiors.

Change Management

The authors offer suggestions and methods used to implement real changes within an organization. Several are summarized as follows:

- Use dashboards to indicate progress in improvement and ensure accountability and transparency each step of the way.
- Establish an office of improvement expertise. Once continuous improvement was in the exclusive domain of so-called experts and hired consultants; now, the organization generates far greater impact where everyone is engaged in creating change,
- CI initiatives must not all start at the same time but must be deployed in a deliberate and measured way, gradually expanding the units involved in the change process. It was widely held that change is better accepted when it minimally alters the status quo – at least at the beginning of the process.
- It is wise to include CI performance in promotion criteria and reward accordingly.

Robinson and Schroeder emphasize that change management is more important than the individual tools and techniques, either available or desired. In fact, one of the most important lessons communicated by the examples provided in the book was that people who *do* the work usually understand the problems *better* than upper management who are often disconnected from the experiences of actual operations. To elicit suggestions for change, it is critical to bypass suggestion-box thinking and move directly to direct discourse and the

exchange of ideas with those who know the challenges to operational efficiency. To credibly evaluate many front-line ideas, managers must first familiarize themselves with the details of the underlying problem and then assess the specifics (cost, time, and feasibility) of the proposed solution. And even then, they may not understand a lot of the ideas and their supporting rationales or know the front-line workers involved (p.122). Without question, process improvement is a critical issue for today's managers.

Lean and Six Sigma provides a summary of the book's success examples:

City of Denver Excise and License

- Long wait times (up to 8 hours) due to incorrect forms and incomplete information. Many customers arrived due to poor voice messaging system. To improve, they created pre-assembled form packets organized by license.
- Created job aid for residents to reduce interruptions during filling out background check entry forms, and aligning the form to match the computer entry.
- After 18 months of transformation, the average wait time went from 1 hour and 40 minutes down to 7 minutes, and peak wait times were reduced from 5 hours down to 15 minutes.

Province of New Brunswick (Canada)

- Education: Launched a Six Sigma project to boost the percentage of students reading at the appropriate age level from 22 percent to 78 percent using a Pareto chart to identify the top reasons for distractions in the classroom
- Finance: To meet two years of budget cuts, they conducted Lean Six Sigma training, Value Stream Maps, Kaizen Rapid Improvement Events, Waste Walks and Daily Management to reduce costs by 750,000 CAD and 1.3 million CAD in soft savings.

The Royal Mint

- Were asked to produce Olympic medals for the London games in 2012, but didn't have the time or capacity to meet the demand.
- They reduced the distance with a new work cell layout from 7.5 km to 122 m, which helped them meet the Olympic demand in time.
- This also reduced the workspace by 25%, and work-in-process (WIP) from 3500 tons to 750 tons.

Highways England

- They needed to reduce costs by 1.2 billion, but 95% of their budget was with contractors (not in their control), so they worked with their contractors to train and implement *Lean Construction Institute* methods across supply chain.
- They developed a Lean Maturity Assessment to help measure progress of the program.
- They also came up with an innovative program to incentivize sharing across suppliers, where part of any savings goes back to the supplier with the idea, but the others would receive some of those savings to encourage sharing and replication of those ideas.

Ramsey County (St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota)

- Shared knowledge to find parole violations across different cities and counties by setting up a report each night to be sent to all Parole Officers.

Washington State Patrol

- Evaluated vehicle conversion process and removed 53 wasteful steps, added cross-training, and eliminated last-minute customization jobs.
- Reduced maintenance costs while reducing miles used per vehicle from 150,000 to 110,000, saving \$500K due to the higher value of vehicles.
- Rearranged flow of vehicles coming into garage and organized the vehicle keys.
- Developed magnetic alignment templates for cutting or drilling holes, and selected plastic seat covers instead of replacing and storing entirely new seats.
- As a result, were able to triple the vehicle conversions with no new people (12 to 36)
- Improved wire harnessing process to reduce costs from suppliers, and eventually brought work in-house due to freed up resources, resulting in \$500 reduction per harness.

City of Denton (Texas)

- It was taking 65 days to hire employees. After evaluating the process during a Rapid Improvement Event (RIE), they removed excessive reviews and delays (10 wasteful steps), removed batching of applications, added custom questions to each application to reduce review time and more quickly find the best applicants, and created a Pareto chart of common defects types.
- As a result, were able to shorten the application window from 1 month to 1-2 weeks, and reduced 25 days from the hire process (65 days down to 40 days).

The authors readily acknowledge that smaller governmental departments, e.g., on a county or municipal level, command different levels of attention and resources. But once the attention is turned to larger entities and systems, e.g., states and countries, new challenges arise. One size does not fit all and thus, a different type of analysis and explored solutions are often different as are time and resource considerations. Businesses – both in the public and private

sectors – should maintain process charts for purposes of visualizing the mechanics of change is a means of improving it. The authors stress that most high-level, complex problems are indeed systems-level problems and cut across multiple processes; that is, they are rarely solved with a single-home resolution. They are interconnecting and have their own contributing factors requiring strong organization skills, patience, and considerable resources warranting long-term commitment.

The book highlights several processes of improvement, the primary being Six Sigma (a business methodology for quality improvement that identifies and measures how many defects there are in a current process and seeks to systematically eliminate them). The UK mint crisis shows that top players played direct, often invisible roles, in recognizing front-line engagement and improvement activity. One manager even specifically observed that direct involvement by senior leaders has a much greater impact than a rewards scheme.

Larger Projects: *Practical Innovation* demonstrates how both private industry and the public sector can learn from each other and have done so. Larger, system-wide reform may warrant organizing the legislative process and establishing broad guidelines for how operating requirements are to be developed and sustained. Budgetary and administrative cutbacks do create more sizable and formidable obstacles as policies must be clarified and quantified. Faced with this duality of operational challenges, the municipality of York and the provincial government of New Brunswick, Canada have successfully blended robust economic performance, a commitment to healthy communities and a sustainable environment, and transparent governance to serve as the guiding principles necessary to achieve long-lasting change. Successes like these are splendidly narrated in the book as well as others from Colorado to Washington and Minnesota, as well as from Canada to the UK.

Smaller Departments: The prospect of creating a front-line driven CI program may seem overwhelming to the low-level manager in charge of a small group of workers; there is much to learn but significant progress can be attainable relatively quickly. The authors note that superiors are not always receptive to concerns and ideas of change. In fact, subordinates are often chastised or ignored when they assume the role of information conveyer. But when managers and other leaders are trained to build solid working relationships - both upstream and downstream - and with key support people available, then change might more rapidly occur.

Conclusion

Front-line workers represent an obvious, yet often underused source of knowledge. With a newfound emphasis on front-line worker impact and feedback, there exists the possibility of building an information loop. Knowledge and ideas are transmitted to higher managers who respond in terms of support and increased allocation of resources. *Practical Innovation* highlights the importance of establishing and maintaining these channels of communication among all organizational sectors instead of relying upon ineffective, hierarchal, and stagnant classifications of the workforce. Real and substantive change most often happens from the bottom up instead of from the top down. Robinson and Schroeder deftly underline this finding by providing the reader with well documented examples of successful change.

— Elizabeth Gingerich, JVBL Editor