Leadership and Organizational Culture: Sustaining Dialogue between Practitioners and Scholars

Few topics in the study of contemporary public organizations better illustrate the burdens—and potential benefits—of sustaining dialogue between practitioners and scholars than the interplay between leadership, organizational culture, and public sector performance. Following two decades of intensive research and advocacy, the last 10 years have seen diminished scholarly attention to this subject, while efforts to shape culture remain central to the leadership of public organizations. This essay reflects on the 8 Cs of organizational culture: complicated, control, competence, commitments, credibility, conflict, context, and change.

The dialogue between practitioner and scholar—between Alexandria, Virginia, city manager Jim Hartmann and Professor Anne M. Khademian—informs their thoughtful essay on leadership and organizational culture. Hartmann and Khademian observe that, while scholarly interest in the impact of leadership and culture on the performance of public organizations has in some senses “petered out,” they remain vital to the demands of change in public organizations like the city of Alexandria. Thoughtful dialogue about leadership and culture as management ideas is burdened by awe-inspiring fecundity. Between the common catchphrases and clichés, distilled and redistilled by entrepreneurial “thought leaders,” and jargon-laden research in fields as divergent as phenomenological anthropology and corporate branding—where does one begin?

Hartmann and Khademian begin with the practical demands of managing change in the city of Alexandria and Hartmann’s efforts to shape the city government’s internal management culture. The Alexandria case nicely illustrates efforts by public sector leaders to change organizational culture and alter decision making in order to improve public sector performance. Drawing together experience and pragmatically applied scholarly ideas, Hartmann and Khademian offer new perspective on the interplay between leadership and organizational culture.

In the spirit of Tom Peters and Bob Waterman’s In Search of Excellence (1982), this essay is organized around the “eight Cs” of organizational culture: complicated, control, competence, commitments, credibility, conflict, context, and change. It was, after all, the seventh of McKinsey & Company’s “seven Ss” (revised from the insufficiently punchy “super-ordinate goals” to “shared values”) that helped ignite popular and scholarly interest in corporate culture (McKenna 2006, 213; Peters and Waterman 1982; Waterman, Peters, and Philips 1980). As a way of organizing ideas, alliteration is no instrument of parsimonious theory. On the other hand, the eight Cs do illustrate both the richness and the bewildering diversity of current thinking about organizational culture. The following section begins with the first and most straightforward of the eight Cs of organizational culture: complicated.

Thoughtful dialogue about leadership and culture as management ideas is burdened by awe-inspiring fecundity. Between the common catchphrases and clichés, distilled and redistilled by entrepreneurial “thought leaders,” and jargon-laden research in fields as divergent as phenomenological anthropology and corporate branding—where does one begin?

In a sense, it is fitting that culture means different things to different audiences. Its power rests in the particulars—in the commitments, assumptions, symbols, and artifacts that make organizations and organizational identification distinctive.
Oversimplifying matters, this point marks the divergence of two broad research traditions. An interpretive or “thick” tradition grows out of ethnography and critical inquiry. This tradition attempts to situate and understand culture. It challenges the meaningfulness of the abstract generalized knowledge that preoccupies many observers.

Cultural analyses of organizations generate situation-specific knowledge that reflects organizational actors’ understandings of their situations and researchers’ interpretations of those understandings as well as their experiences. Both the subject of study and the researcher are understood to be situated in specific contexts. Generalizable typologies are not possible. (Yanow and Adams 2000, 142)

Bluntly, much of the scholarly literature in this tradition is obscure to practitioners. Nonetheless, its diverse approaches continue to generate robust and compelling scholarship, contributing to the development of narrative, constructivist, feminist, situated learning and a range of other theoretical accounts of organizational culture (Cook and Yanow 1993; Yanow 1995).

A broad positivist tradition, by contrast, aims to analyze and develop generalizable propositions—to develop what Chester Barnard (1938) called a “scientific approach” to the study of organizational culture. Barnard’s The Functions of the Executive embodies and remains a major influence on the diverse approaches that follow in this tradition (Williamson 1995). Barnard saw a disconnect between dominant theories of organization characterized by “unbalance and false emphases” (1938, 289) on the formal aspects of organization and the world he observed as a practicing executive. He sought to develop a systematic account of the interplay between the formal and informal aspects of organizations, and the role of executive leadership in shaping these dynamics over time. Barnard acknowledged the natural tension between developing a general theory and the practical, prescriptive demands of organizational life. Increasingly, as Barnard’s influence has grown, that tension has manifested in divergent streams of advocacy and analysis. In some sense, the result has both fulfilled Barnard’s scientific ambitions and exacerbated the imbalance that he sought to address.

This is the challenge that Hartmann and Khademian take up. And it is in this spirit that the following sections examine two basic propositions—first, that public sector leaders cultivate organizational culture, because, second, organizational culture shapes the performance of public organizations. Again, it’s complicated. Both propositions are beset by confounding factors, making hazardous the development of general claims. Be that as it may, such claims play a prominent role in the management of contemporary public organizations.

Control, Competence, and Commitments

Public sector leaders attempt to cultivate organizational culture as a means of controlling administrative behavior and building organizational competence, defined as the skill and capacity to accomplish necessary tasks. Kaufman (1960) famously describes the control of a diffuse Forest Service bureaucracy through the recruitment and socialization of personnel and the cultivation of a dominant internal culture. Many of these practices and rituals were, as others have described, the result of conscious “imprinting” by the Service’s formative leader, Gifford Pinchot (Carpenter 2001, 286–87; Wilson 1989, 96–97). Selznick analyzes the efforts of leaders in large-scale organizations to cultivate organizational culture or “character” rooted in the organization’s “special capabilities and limitations,” what he calls its “distinctive competence” (1957, 42–56).

For Selznick, organizational character and competence emerge from its underlying commitments. The task of leadership is to shape and maintain those commitments. Among the classic cases is the Social Security Administration, whose formative leaders created a robust esprit de corps—“the Marine Corps of the domestic civil service—elite and invincible” (Derthick 1990). In the words of Commissioner of Social Security Robert M. Ball,

[“]he administrator’s fundamental task . . . is to think through just what the program is, in simple, stark terms, and then in the same simple, stark terms, to articulate the long-term goals in administering that program, the style and spirit of administration that is desirable, and the value system to be used in choosing alternatives. . . . He or she must win the organization to the same general value system so that the self-direction of people all down the line—and self-direction is the only kind that amounts to much—is in general accord with the value system (1964, 97–98).

Drawing on Selznick, Khademian writes, “Commitments provide a guide for action and reaction. They are a reference point, sometimes consciously applied, sometimes unconsciously. By their very nature, commitments are deeply imbedded in the work of an office, organization, or several organizations working together” (2002, 4). Together, shared organizational commitments create a distinctive agency character or culture, which forms the basis of agency discretion and expert autonomy (Khademian 1996). Because they are so deeply rooted, however, they are difficult to shape. “[T]hese commitments are costly,” Selznick writes. “They bind the organization to specific aims and procedures, often greatly limiting the freedom of leadership to deploy its resources, and reducing the capacity of the organization to survive under new conditions” (1957, 18). The competence essential for organizational maintenance and adaptation is also one of the chief barriers to leadership.

This tension between competence as a capacity and as a commitment frustrates and disciplines the “transformational” ambitions of agency leadership. In his Creating Public Value, Mark Moore attempts to strike a balance, noting that “[t]here is value in the cumulative experience of the organization,” but “[t]he problem is that respect for institutional continuity can become an excuse for resisting real change” (1995, 50–52). Moore’s complaint that competence may justify resistance to “real change” invokes the competency traps and lock-in that are obstacles to adaptation in all types of organizations and institutions (March 1994, 96–97; North 1990). Advocates of public sector reform know well the frustratingly slow and unpredictable course of organizational learning, problems amplified by bureaucratic organization and by the distinctive character of public sector governance.

Against this backdrop, when he was appointed in 2005, Alexandria city manager Jim Hartmann set out to build a new leadership team to change the way the city government functioned. As Hartmann...
and Khademian describe, he came to the conclusion that city government needed to become more transparent, flexible, and customer focused, push greater decision-making responsibility to the organization’s front line, and improve communication across departments. With the help of external consultants, Hartmann and his staff developed a range of strategies to achieve these objectives.

In 2006, the city of Alexandria realigned its departmental budgets around programs and activities, integrating information about program missions, goals, and results. By most accounts, the city’s Managing for Results Initiative has promoted activity-based decision making, enabling the city to constrain expenditures prior to and during the unprecedented budgetary challenges that emerged in subsequent years. This is arguably, in part, because the effort to redesign the city’s budgetary architecture was one element of a multifaceted leadership strategy to shape how city personnel think and work. Learned routines essential for ongoing organizational performance create natural barriers to change. Department staff must “get in the habit,” a process requiring the investment of time and commitment. The city’s overview of the Managing for Results Initiative notes, “The experience of other organizations has demonstrated that a long-term, lasting commitment to systems building is needed to engage stakeholders and change organizational culture, in order to achieve sustained success.”

Results-model planning and budgeting techniques direct attention, aid heuristic search and problem solving, identify problems and opportunities, and motivate the development of solutions. Their usefulness stems not from the provision of isolated bits of data, but their capacity to understand and learn from the information they provide. This depends on existing organizational competencies embodied in the routine performance, skilled practical thinking, incremental problem solving, and relationships that drive information production. Because competence takes time to develop, administrators depend largely on streams of analysis produced by prior mandates and initiatives—what Feldman (1989) terms “information inventories.” The result is feedback that shapes future information production, problem representation, and, ultimately, decision making. Because analytic information is typically produced and maintained by the agency, it is subject to information loss (Downs 1957) and bears an interpretive structure framed by the organizational units with the earliest, most easily interpretable information (Stinchcombe 1990).

Even those who emphasize the importance of local or frontline knowledge and discretion generally concede that claims of occupational or departmental expertise tend to be self-serving. The complexity, uncertainty, and often unique nature of government responsibilities means that claims of professional knowledge and skill among civil servants cannot be divorced from bargaining over occupational control and the professional ideologies that give these negotiations meaning. This may explain, in part, why one tends to find richer treatments of the relationship between organizational capabilities and performance in the field of contemporary business strategy, where competence- or resource-based theories of organization have been integrated among the field’s core models.

Reforms such as the Managing for Results Initiative draw analytical information to the center and create a common framework for the cultivation of analytic competence across government agencies (Barzelay and Campbell 2003). Often initiated early in a leader’s tenure, these reforms signal his or her priorities, expectations, and commitment to shared values (March and Olsen 1976). These initiatives attempt to reinforce and reframe organizational culture around leadership priorities.

More than a half century ago, while vacationing in New Hampshire in the summer of 1958, Social Security commissioner Ball dictated what would become the Social Security Administration’s Statement of Bureau Objectives. Returning to headquarters, Ball formed a working group that produced a statement that remained central to the organization’s training and planning initiatives well into the 1970s. It reads, in part,

> An organization which sets forth its objectives in writing does so to help give consistency to its actions and unity to its planning, particularly its long-range planning. This Statement of Bureau Objectives reflects the principles, the goals, and the more enduring plans to which we are committed within the framework of Social Security Administration policy. It reflects . . . the ideals to which we aspire, agreement upon basic purposes, and commitment to a way of administration. It is a guide to our planning and a yardstick against which we measure the adequacy of our performance. (Ball 1958, 101)

The Statement of Bureau Objectives sought to codify the organization’s principles and ideals to guide planning and performance. It was one of a variety of self-consciously designed representations, embraced by a leadership committed to stable, ordered service and expansion (Derthick 1979). It is a response to the demands of mediated communication in a diffuse and growing bureaucracy. Strained by changing politics, shifting demographics, and aging technology, the Social Security Administration’s leadership has made prominent use of the logic that Ball articulated in the Agency Strategic Plan of 1988, the National Performance Review, and, more recently, the President’s Management Agenda (2001; see Dull 2006a, 2006b).

Years later, former commissioner Ball recalled the Statement of Bureau Objectives and remembered, “I thought of doing this really because of something that I had read in a Peter Drucker book,” recalling, “[Drucker] suggested that the most successful organizations were ones that had clear ideas about the central purposes of the company . . . I thought I really should spell it out for people who work at Social Security” (Ball 2001). Drucker was among the earliest and most influential popular writers on management and leadership in a field that has since become an industry, selling millions of books each year (Micklethwait and Wooldridge 1996). Constant repackaging and marketing by entrepreneurial writers and consultants have fostered a healthy disdain for “management thinking” among many managers, who often dismiss initiatives such as Ball’s (and Hartmann’s) as the “flavor of the month.” Management reform has developed a credibility problem (Dull 2009).

Credibility and Conflict
Christopher McKenna’s (2006) incisive history of management consulting makes the case that the popularization of corporate culture owes its origins, in part, to the unfinished professionalization of management consulting as a field. From the field’s emergence in
1930s, competition between firms frustrated efforts to acquire the attributes and status of a formal profession for the field as a whole. The major consultancies were “unwilling to acknowledge that individual practitioners were all of equal professional standing—an inherent attribute of the professions—with the staff in their own elite firms,” McKenna writes (2006, 203). As a consequence, “Professionalism, ultimately, became a characteristic of individual firms, not management consulting as a field.”

Few firms more fully embodied this development than McKinsey & Company, which developed a corporate strategy rooted in the firm’s distinctive professional ethos. Its recruitment and indoctrination of new staff, its highly competitive “up-or-out” system of promotion, and a strong sense of stewardship among its partners cultivated a unique professional ideology within the firm that gave it “an advantage not only by appealing to important corporate clients, but also by improving the consultancy’s recruitment and retention of top caliber staff” (McKenna 2006, 207). Buffeted by recession and the rise of new competitors during the 1970s, the extraordinary success of McKinsey consultants Tom Peters and Bob Waterman’s In Search of Excellence (1982) presented the firm as an implicit model for growing interest in the management of corporate culture and ultimately revived its consulting practice.

At the heart of this legacy is the seventh of Peters and Waterman’s “seven Ss” framework—shared values—which they argue is a vital feature of what they term “loose-tight” organizational arrangements. According to Peters and Waterman, the loose-tight properties of organizations combine both procedural decentralization, allowing frontline personnel flexibility and encouraging innovation, and the centralization of purpose, committing the organization to one set of core priorities from which it will not diverge. It is the essence of what leaders of large organizations, such as Commissioner Ball and City Manager Hartmann, hope to achieve. However, three decades and millions of copies of In Search of Excellence later, the credibility of leaders who aim to bring about “cultural change” arguably has been eroded by the value of culture as a commodity (McKenna 2006). Skeptics complain that thinking about corporate culture tends “to treat culture almost as if it were a souvenir for corporate tourists: collections of departmental celebrations, retirement mementos, office costumes, phrase book terminologies, and the like, which were claimed to be unique to the culture in which they were found” (Yanow and Adams 2000, 140). The market for management ideas has given us culture in a box.

Problems of credibility shape the capacity of leaders to cultivate organizational culture. The relationship between trusted leadership and organizational performance is well established among students of public administration (Dull 2009). By way of illustration, Figure 1 plots an index variable, trusted leadership, drawn from a series of seven questions from the Merit Systems Protection Board’s Merit Principles Survey (2005), gauging trust among federal agency personnel that managers above their immediate supervisor will communicate clearly, listen to concerns, exercise fairness, and act with integrity. A more detailed explanation of the data presented here is included in the appendix. Because of its size, more than 30,000 respondents in 2005, the Merit Principles Survey provides a useful basis for examining broad attitudinal patterns across federal government agencies. Each of the six scatter plots in figure 1 graphs organization-level mean values for trusted leadership, plotted on all six x-axes, and a series of correlated variables on each of the y-axes.

The 43 federal government organizations included (identified in the appendix) are large and diverse, but differences in agency central tendencies are nonetheless clearly observable. Almost a full point on a five-point ordinal scale separates the agency-level averages of high trusted leadership agencies such as NASA, the Secret Service, and the Coast Guard from agencies on the low end of the distribution,
such as the Transportation Security Administration and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The bivariate distributions illustrated in the three graphs at the top of figure 1 represent *job satisfaction* (1a), whether respondents *say they are free to exercise voice* (1b), and the *perceived performance* (1c) of respondents’ organizations on the y-axes. All are positively correlated with *trusted leadership*. If agency respondents generally trust agency leadership, the agency also typically exhibits high levels of job satisfaction, openness, and a belief among employees that the agency does good work.

By contrast, *turnover intention* (1e), measuring the percentage of agency respondents who say they plan to leave the agency in the coming year, and *filed a formal complaint* (1f), measuring the percentage of respondents reporting that they filed a formal work complaint against their agency in the last two years, are both negatively correlated with *trusted leadership*. These are, of course, greatly reduced representations of a complex reality. Moreover, bivariate correlations between items on the same survey gets us nowhere near the evidence required for valid causal inference. That said, where trust is low that agency leaders will listen to concerns and act with fairness agency, respondents are more likely to report that they plan to leave the organization or even that they have taken formal action, pursuing a job-related complaint.

Knowing the general level of trust in an organization’s leadership and nothing else offers a surprisingly useful guide by which to guess a number of other attributes generally deemed important to organizational performance, at least in these data. Most strikingly, *free to exercise voice* yields a 0.896 correlation with *trusted leadership*. If an agency’s respondents report low levels of trust that leadership will communicate clearly and honor commitments, that agency is much less likely to be characterized by frank and reliable internal feedback and deliberation.

As a pattern, *leadership trust* is sticky. Brehm and Gates (1997, 2008) combine formal theory and analysis of survey data from a range of public sector contexts for a sophisticated treatment departing from the broad patterns depicted here. Contributing to a traditional debate in the study of American public administration (Friedrich 1940), they contend that public bureaucracies rely vitally on informal or “invisible” sources of authority, and, as a consequence, public sector leaders exercise influence as coordinators, teachers, and mission advocates. Brehm and Gates conclude, in their words, “[O]ne powerful, useful function of the public executive is to train by making clear what works and what does not within the organization” (2008, 147). This is a function rooted in hierarchical trust and the belief based on experience—both acquired directly and received in the form of cultural messages—that hierarchical superiors can be trusted to honor their commitments.

Recall Hartmann’s “road show,” his admission of error, and the extraordinary release of thousands of e-mails, demonstrating transparency and a commitment to learn from error. Hartmann’s approach to dealing with this difficult situation carries obvious risks. But in the context of broader actions demonstrating his commitment to a clear set of values and priorities, it reinforces a reputation that Hartmann can be trusted to address problems with clarity, openness, and integrity. For some in the auditorium, voluntarily releasing thousands of internal e-mails presumably even seemed threatening. For others, it no doubt reinforced their perception that Hartmann intended to figure out and address what had gone wrong. Hartmann and Khademian describe stagecraft designed to focus the attention of the city employees, who have been drawn away from their office routines to observe Hartmann’s performance. He may rest assured that his message was received unevenly.

One additional scatter plot (figure 1d) graphs agency-level means for *trusted leadership* on the x-axis and within-agency standard deviations for *trusted leadership* on the y-axis, suggesting that agencies characterized by greater variation in perceptions of *trusted leadership* among respondents generally fall on the lower end of the mean *trusted leadership* scale. Again, all of the necessary caveats are in order: these are simple scatter plots representing admittedly crude measures of organizational culture. But it is hard not to be impressed by the range of opportunities for interesting empirical research looking at public sector organizational culture, and students of public administration are now engaged in a range of scholarly undertakings that are contributing to how we think about culture as a integrating feature of organizations. This research looks beyond the tendency to treat organizational cultures as integrated and homogenous—an idea implicit, for example, in Selznick’s (1957) extended analogy between organizational character and individual personality. Today, a substantial body of scholarship explores the dynamics of multiple, sometimes competing subcultures within organizations (Hofstede 1998; Wilson 1989). One set of perspectives holds that culture acts as a mechanism of distributional conflict and bargaining among competing groups (Knight 1992) and symbols designed to manage the scope of conflict in the service of powerful interests (Edelman 1985). A very different view holds that, in some cases, competition between subcultures enhances the capacity of organizations to adapt to changing conditions (Boisnier and Chatman 2002).

Contemporary students of public administration employ a variety of empirical approaches to investigate the compound nature of organizational cultures. O’Leary (2009) reflects on Kaufman’s *Forest Ranger* through the extraordinary case of a single individual responding to deeply held professional and organizational commitments, demonstrating the unpredictable and entrepreneurial behavior of human responses to institutional arrangements. Pandey, Coursey, and Moynihan (2007), Garnett, Marlowe, and Pandey (2008), Walker and Brewer (2008) and Moynihan and Landuyt (2009) use survey evidence to explore the interplay between organizational culture and the formal and informal aspects of public organizations and the consequences for organizational learning. A separate tradition investigates the consequences of goal ambiguity for organizational process and outcomes. Chun and Rainey (2005) show that well-specified tasks are positively correlated with organizational effectiveness and that executive leadership yields no...
discernable influence. The picture that emerges is one in which formal and informal organizational arrangements develop in response to basic features of the organization's delegated goals or tasks—by the complexity and uncertainty characterizing the organizational environment.

Context and Change

William J. Fell, parking meter repairman for the city of Alexandria, made a habit of arriving at work early. Such initiative is characteristic of many motivated, high-performing public servants. Unfortunately for everyone involved, punctuality was indeed a sign of exceptional motivation. In the early morning hours before his shift, Fell made the rounds checking Alexandria's parking meters for coins and stealing them. When he was arrested in April 2009, Fell admitted to embezzling more than $100,000 in coins from Alexandria's parking meters over the course of a year. A search of Fell's home revealed tens of thousands of dollars in coins. News reports marveled at the brashness of Fell's crime, noting that one of his supervisors had become suspicious and uncovered the crime by following him early in morning as Fell emptied meters (Klein 2009; Klein and Mummolo 2009).

An unfortunate not altogether uncommon story except perhaps in its boldness, Fell's experiment in opportunism usefully illustrates two aspects of organizational culture. First, rules promoting employee vigilance and integrity are not uniformly observed. Students of human behavior is subject to unpredictable variation. Somewhere in the conduct of the government business. Whatever the model, all human behavior is subject to unpredictable variation. Somewhere in that “error” is a place for parking meter repairmen who begin pocketing coins.

I learned this story shortly after the news broke from a former student who works for the city. He mentioned that a fellow acquaintance, an analyst in the city’s budget office, had noticed a dip in the revenues from parking meters and tipped off a supervisor in the transportation department. I later asked the analyst if this was true. In a tone that implied he was only doing his job, he said the city had raised its meter rates, but the revenues went “south not north.” He sent an e-mail to a supervisor in the department, and a few months later, the story was in the newspapers. I admit repeating this story to a number of other “good government” types, remarking on how great it was. Strictly speaking, though, the analyst was simply doing his job—carefully and conscientiously. Simply reading the story in the newspaper, one might ask how Fell was able to steal so much before getting caught. For some, it no doubt reinforced pre-existing attitudes about government. In popular commentary, the event elicited comparisons to the recently disclosed case of Harriet Walters, who embezzled as much as $50 million over a decade as a supervisor in the Washington, D.C., tax office (Stueve 2008). This brings to light the second point: context matters. The social context in which I learned of the events clearly framed how I thought of them.

One critique of organizational culture is that it conceptualizes organizations as “closed systems,” impervious to external conditions. This can be a bit of a caricature—Barnard (1938), for example, recognizes the vital importance of the organizational domain (Scott 1995). Selznick’s (1957) organizational character—the robustness or rigidity of its commitments—emerges through the interplay of its tasks, the clarity of its goals, and the information that guides its decisions. The New Institutionalisms that developed during the last three decades of the twentieth century in fields such as sociology, economics, and political science shared an emphasis on patterns of stability and change. Each was motivated by efforts to explain the influence of context. Each tradition has also integrated elements of the cognitive and behavioral sciences to help explain cultural variation. In sociology, Scott (2008) builds from foundations in cognitive theory to explain the informal aspects of institutional analysis embodied by his “normative” and “cultural-cognitive” pillars. Institutional economics explains culture as a response to uncertainty and to shared, evolving cognitive and social commitments (North 2005). Cultural norms and symbols pass knowledge between generations, and culture evolves through a process of collective learning that occupies the space between problems and the competence of agents to solve them (Mantzavinos 2001). In political science, the study of policy feedback (Mettler and Soss 2004; Pierson 1993) and constructivist international relations theorists (Finnemore 1996), to name just two examples, build empirically grounded explanations of stability and change rooted in shared understandings among actors. Such a diversity of observational methods and interpretive approaches reflects the complex and changing nature of cultural commitments. They are rooted in shared ideas and values, formal artifacts and symbols, and the performance of rituals and routines. These may be rooted in the broader political and social context (Peters 1995, 45–88), the social organization of occupational expertise (Freidson 2001), and an inexhaustible array of contingencies.

When Jim Hartmann attends meetings in Alexandria’s city council chamber, for example, he and the members of the city council sit below a 10-foot by 13-foot lithograph of Alexandria as it appeared in 1863 (Goodsell 1988). It is a constant symbol of the city’s legacies. Alone, it is of little tangible consequence, but set within a broader of the social and political context, it powerfully frames the work that Hartmann and the city’s public servants do. The Alexandria depicted above the council chamber dais had been the sight of the first fatalities of the American Civil War just two years earlier. It had long served as a major port in the domestic slave trade, and had seen its population more than double to 18,000 in less than two years between 1862 and 1863 as escaped slaves or so-called contrabands streamed into Alexandria from across the Southern states (Richardson 2007). Today, Alexandria is lead by an African-American mayor and the city’s efforts to promote diversity have garnered national recognition. The city council chamber is representative of what Goodsell calls the “midcentury chamber.” It is more modest in design compared to the grand traditional city hall, and the city council sits at a common dais facing a public gallery. While portions of Alexandria’s city hall date to 1871, its city council chamber is on the third floor of a building constructed in 1945. Like many other midcentury chambers, its entrance is “just another door”—at the end of a typical, utilitarian office hallway (Goodsell 1988). The picture that emerges is one of an established city bureaucracy that grew out of complex legacies.
that Social Security commissioner Ball believed was vital to organizational performance. For much of the twentieth century, its strong internal culture supported the unique autonomy enjoyed by Social Security administrators. As Carpenter observes, “Bureaucratic culture is not something merely internal to the agency. External ‘reputation’ and internal ‘culture’ are only analytically separable” (2001, 376 n. 22). Bureaucracies characterized by strong internal commitments and broad support within the political system have the capacity to set agendas and frame decisions. However, significant environmental changes challenge that stability, disrupting commitments, upending the lessons of experience embedded in organizational routines, and fragmenting organizational cultures. Even if an organization’s leadership recognizes the demands of changing environmental conditions, the strongest and most unified organizational cultures can, in fact, prove detrimental. In Khademian’s words, “[I]t is precisely because culture evolves to deal with environmental uncertainty and complexity that it is very difficult to manage, or even budge” (2002, 26). For public servants, change often means risk. Like many public sector leaders, Hartmann hopes to cultivate a culture that is less “risk adverse” and enhance the city’s capacity to adapt by decentralizing decisions and encouraging city executives to think strategically. He must first overcome routines and commitments that are deeply rooted not only in the city’s agencies, but in American government more generally.

Conclusion: Sustaining Dialogue between Scholars and Practitioners

Sustaining dialogue between practitioners and scholars improves theory and informs practice. The tumultuous history of that idea offers plenty of reasons for skepticism, but it also offers evidence that the study of public organizations and the quality of public sector governance are diminished when vigorous dialogue between the two is not sustained. This point is nicely illustrated by Herbert Simon’s account of the gap between theory and the reality that inspired the insights that became known as “bounded rationality” and “organizational identification,” related by Bryan D. Jones (1999). An undergraduate economics major at the University of Chicago, Simon spent the summer of 1935 observing the budgeting process in the recreation department in his hometown of Milwaukee, Wisconsin:

I came as a gift-bearing Greek, fresh from an intermediate price theory course taught by the grandfather of Chicago-School neoclassical laissez-faire economics, Henry Simons. . . . My economics training showed me how to budget rationally. Simply compare the marginal utility of a proposed expenditure with its marginal cost, and approve it only if the utility exceeds the cost. However, what I saw in Milwaukee didn’t seem to be an application of this rule. I saw a lot of bargaining, of reference back to last year’s budget, and incremental changes in it. If the word marginal was ever spoken, I missed it. Moreover, which participants would support which items was quite predictable. . . . I could see a clear connection between people’s positions on budget matters and the values and beliefs that prevailed in their suborganizations. (Simon 1999, quoted in Jones 1999, 300)

Thus, he says, the seeds of what would become bounded rationality and organizational identification were planted. Throughout his legendary career, Simon did what he asked others to do, disciplining theoretical models through careful empirical observation, demonstrating his willingness to defy academic specializations in search of insight, and comparing against the experience of practitioners engaged in the “real” world (Dill 2004; Dosi 2004). Though he once acknowledged that the exchange between academics and practitioners was “like mixing oil and water . . . left to themselves, the oil and water will separate again” (Dill 2004, 199), Simon was committed to the education of practicing managers.

Hartmann and Khademian mix that oil and water, drawing together Hartmann’s experience as Alexandria’s city manager and Khademian’s latest thinking about organizational commitments in the context of “organizing” as an ongoing process. The results are not seamless, but represent how thoughtful reflection and dialogue can inform efforts to manage change in large public organizations. My hope is that this essay prompts students of public administration to embrace the richness and diversity of current thinking about the interplay between leadership and organizational culture.

Appendix

Federal agency-level data used in figure 1 are drawn from the Merit Principles Survey (2005) administered by the Merit Systems Protection Board. The following agencies are included (N): Air Force (494); Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (518); Bureau of Customs and Border Patrol (415); Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (499); Bureau of Land Management (549); Bureau of Prisons (427); Centers for Disease Control (458); Defense Contract Management Agency (593); Defense Finance and Accounting Service (801); Defense Logistics Agency (679); Drug Enforcement Agency (363); Department of Education (527); Department of Energy (516); Environmental Protection Agency (479); Federal Aviation Administration (512); Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (567); Federal Emergency Management Agency (457); Food Safety and Inspection Service (599); Forest Service (598); Housing and Urban Development (342); Bureau of Indian Affairs (254); Indian Health Service (449); Internal Revenue Service (666); Department of Labor (611); National Aeronautics and Space Administration (659); National Institutes of Health (379); National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (784); National Park Service (583); Natural Resources Conservation Service (669); Office of Personnel Management (497); Office of the Comptroller of the Currency (493); Patent and Trademark Office (597); Public Buildings Service (373); Social Security Administration (757); State Department (452); Transportation Security Administration (405); Coast Guard (427); Marine Corps (539); Secret Service (554); Army Corps of Engineers (499); Veterans Benefits Administration (585); Veterans Health Administration (559).

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Agency-level mean values are converted to standard scores, and, in most cases, variable scales have been reversed for substantive interpretation. Variables are constructed as follows:

**Trust leadership.** Seven-item index (alpha = .96): “I trust managers above my immediate supervisor to:

- Clearly communicate organizational performance expectations
- Fairly assess my performance and contributions
- Listen fairly to my concerns
- Apply discipline fairly and only when justified
- Act with integrity
- Refrain from favoritism
- Keep the organization informed

**Job satisfaction.** Two-item index (alpha = .70): “Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements about your job and work setting: (1) In general, I am satisfied with my job. (2) The work I do is meaningful to me.”

**Free to exercise voice.** Three-item index (alpha = .83): (1) “Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements about your job and work setting: I am able to openly express concerns at work.” (2) “I trust my supervisor to: Listen fairly to my concerns.” (3) “I am comfortable discussing workplace conflicts with my supervisor.”

**Performance.** Two-item index (alpha = .72): (1) “Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements about your agency: My agency produces high-quality products and services.” (2) “Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements about your work you: My work unit produces high-quality products and services.”

**Trusted leadership (SD).** Within-agency standard deviation for trusted leadership.

**Turnover intention.** Percentage of respondents answering “very likely” or “somewhat likely” to the question, “How likely is it that you will leave your agency in the next 12 months?”

**Filed formal complaint.** Percentage of respondents answering yes to either of two items: (1) “In the past two years have you made any formal disclosure of fraud, waste, abuse or unlawful behavior at work?” (2) “In the past two years have you exercised any formal appeal, complaint, or grievance right?”

### Notes
1. The performance culture at NASA has become an iconic case (Boin and Shulman 2008).
2. For example, Kelman’s (2005, 21–27) examination of procurement reform traces barriers to change rooted in individual decisions, organizational and bureaucratic learning and politics, and government organizations in particular.
4. From observations of federal agency bureau chiefs, Kaufman notes that “much of the information they did get was extracted and digested from these streams, without which the digests and totals could not have been prepared. Specialists in headquarters monitored and processed them, furnishing the chiefs with the gist of each body of material. Like all of us, the chiefs were the beneficiaries of processes and data they themselves had not ordered or mastered” (1981, 24–33).
5. Another point of ambiguity inherent in claims of professional control among many government employees rests in the distinction between professional and managerial knowledge in their logics (Freidson 2001). For mid- and upper-level career civil servants, managerial knowledge and skill are often central to claims of decisional autonomy.
6. Robert Grant’s (2005, 130–85) strategy text provides a useful summary of applications of analysis to firm resources and capabilities. Grant observes that competence-based approaches represent a shift in attention from the external environment to factors that are internal to the firm during the last decade. Hamel and Prahalad contribute to the wide diffusion of business thinking about, as they put it, “a portfolio of competencies versus a portfolio of businesses” (1990, 81). Competence serves an ambiguous role in contemporary explanations of administrative politics, in part because it is grounded in the contested territory between rationality and social rules. As a broad pattern across a range of fields, some treatments of competence are optimistic, emphasizing efficient use of heuristics by consumers (Gigerenzer and Selten 2001) and of democratic publics (Lupia, McCubbins, and Popkin 2000); others are pessimistic or skeptical, emphasizing the hazards of non-rational decision making (Kahneman and Tversky 2000).
7. For example, state agencies are more likely to adopt strategic planning in the first year of a governor’s term (Berry 1994).
8. The document was later named the Statement of the Social Security Administration Objectives (Ball 2001).
9. A special word of thanks to Tim Johnson for making these data available; see http://www.stanford.edu/~timjl/ (accessed August 3, 2010).
10. Jung et al. (2009) provide a detailed review of current research.
11. I was gratified that Hartmann and Khademian make brief mention of Samuel W. Tucker, who in 1939 organized the first sit-in of the American civil rights movement in Alexandria’s Queen Street Library only a few blocks from city hall. One wonders how many people sitting in a city council meeting are familiar with that part of the city’s history. Ackerman (2000) provides an excellent history of the Tucker’s unheralded protest.

### References


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