

## Working With Culture: The Way the Job Gets Done in Public Programs

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### - Introduction.

In today's business world there are different economic and business theories of organizational behavior, which assume that private organizations are driven mostly by concerns related to efficiency and effectiveness. When an organization cannot reach its objectives in a way that is deemed to be efficient and effective, then serious consequences will follow. To begin with, the profits will drop, and the dividends will do the same also. This would send a signal to competitors and encourage them to challenge the organization's share of the market. The assurance of a "bottom-line profit" is what allows these organizations to have a measure of success and, or, failures. It is this which motivates the search for other ways of delivering goods and services which have a lower cost. In this respect, the literature available in the field of public administration has long advocated that public executives adopt business-like techniques to make their operations similarly efficient (for example see the books from Wilson, 1887; Gulick and Urwick, 1937; Fayol, 1949). But, in today's public management literature there is no exception. Executives are encouraged to create bottom lines, or measures of performance toward which employees can work, and by which they can measure their progress (for example see Behn, 1992; Osborne and Gaebler, 1992).

In the book we are about to discuss, *Working with Culture: How the Job Gets Done in Public Programs*, the author, Anne M. Khademian, has made a useful contribution to the field literature with an insightful, thorough analysis of the issues that public managers who seek to shape organizational culture face in their daily work. Even though one can say that her analysis has some serious limitations, Anne M. Khademian's book, offers a good roadmap for new public managers who want to understand and influence their organizations. The illustrations with engaging case studies make this book very exciting and extremely useful from a professional point of view.

### - Managing culture in organizations.

Recently, one of the daily newspapers published an interview with a career executive of the General Services Administration. The topic was about public management. During the interview the career executive showed his amazing on how a new approach to culture management led him to increase his annual revenues by 20%. The secret was that during the year he implemented a more customer-satisfaction focused philosophy. In order to achieve customer satisfaction the organization improved its quality of service. By doing thus it formed a positive customer perception of the organization which led to customer satisfaction. In management theory, customer satisfaction is one of the premises a company should focus if it wants to increase its profits. What the executive recalled as 'strange' and amazing was that public cultural management, until lately, was not even considered to be part of conducting business from many companies. As Vice-president Al Gore once declared, the reinventing of government is mostly about cultural change within governmental agencies. This would ultimately result in turning rule-bound, stove piped bureaucrats into dynamic public leaders. We may recall the declaration made by vice-president Al Gore that reinventing government is mostly about culture change within governmental agencies. In fact, the most successful examples of the issue at hand that we have so far do involve a change in the culture of the organization. But here comes an interesting question: how much can leaders change organizational culture? Another question would be to determine the degree that agency cultures are determined by regulation legislation, by the political environment, and core technologies not subject to easy alteration? These are questions that the book we are discussing tries to answer adequately.

### - *The Contribution of “Working with Culture”*

Anne Khademian starts by describing the integrative role of organizational culture. She begins her book by outlining the main approaches to this concept. In particular, she explores widely discussed controversy over "whether culture can be managed precisely because of its stamina and durability" (p. 16). From Chester Barnard to modern management *gurus* like Tom Peters, many well known business writers and scholars assume that capable leaders do have the force to change culture within their organization. In contrast to the previous scholars, many established social scientists like Philip Selznick, Herbert Kaufman, and James Q. Wilson, who study public bureaucracies, see organization cultures in a very different way. They prefer to look at organizational cultures as reflecting long-term, somewhat evolutionary adjustments to work processes.

Organizational cultures also tend to abide and be very connected to political, technical, and legal environments. Thus, this situation makes them extremely rigid and unlikely to change only due to the good will of a single person, or even small group of managing team. Public managers have little control over their organizations. Oversight by numerous stakeholders and regulators combine with personnel and budget rules to limit freedom of action. Early practices institutionalize culture; thus after the founding period of a public organization, leaders can change its culture only incrementally.

Chapter three is the central review opinion and this is the most interesting and original contribution to the field. In this chapter, Anne Khademian synthesizes the culture-as-independent-variable and culture-as-dependent-variable approaches. By making some modifications and “adjustments” to the concepts of Selznick, Khademian conceptualizes culture as a public organization's commitments both internally and with the environment. Thus the ultimate result shows that to work with culture includes reaching out to external stakeholders. It is the program commitments that suffuse an organization's tasks, its resources, and its environment. Thus, they are the ones that make up the *roots* of organizational culture. Anne Khademian tries to explain that to understand and eventually influence the roots of culture, public managers must begin by focusing outward toward customers. This is in fact a concept borrowed from Mark Moore (1995) and others. Anyway, public managers, after focusing outward toward customers, should continue by focusing upward to the political system, and inward to agency staff and work force.

In the following chapter, Anne Khademian illustrates her approach through three public organizations whose leaders led cultural revolutions. The first example is that of Kenneth Reardon's University of Illinois Urban Extension and Minority Access Project (UEMAP). The second example is that of the New Haven police under Chief Nicholas Pastore. And the final, and most meaningful example, is that of James Lee Witt's Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

She tries to show how through relentless effort, each of the above mentioned leaders reinvented how the organization saw its purposes, commitments and goals. The dominant case discussed is that of the assistant professor Reardon's leadership of UEMAP, a small program that sponsored academic research. The problem was that this program lacked any connection with the impoverished East St. Louis community it was founded to serve. Through relentless outreach to both the community and the university, Reardon reinvented the UEMAP program's goals and commitments. He moved the program toward values for shared participation, applied research, and constant evaluation and evolution. The result was that when Reardon left it five years later, the renamed East St. Louis Action Research Project (ESLARP) was a partnership between the community and the university. It had become a collaboration to restart failed trash pickups, rebuild housing, and offer college courses to local residents. Thus, many had to acknowledge that this program had been transformed into a success form a previous form of certain failure.

The case that follows as illustration is similar. When Nicholas Pastore took charge of the New Haven Department of Police Service, the city suffered high crime rates and the police had poor relations with the community. The author shows how Nicholas Pastore reformed the department with “uncommon” techniques. He introduced a new form of community policing, accompanied with nontraditional police training. He also established a new partner with the Yale University Child Studies Center to help police aid children affected by violent crime. And, what is most important, through constant interaction with the community, he changed the perception the community had of the police force.

Finally Anne Khademian takes the most effective of her examples to demonstrate her theories and hypotheses. In the most storied and publicized case, the Head Director of FEMA, James Lee Witt, was assigned to the leadership of a troubled agency focused on nuclear proliferation and nuclear warfare. There was an immediate need for change and for a radical one at that. Among the changes he made was the reorganization and rotation of executives, and the measurement of customer satisfaction. James Lee led strategic planning, and preached FEMA into a reinvented and newly respected agency focused on the prevention and mitigation of conventional disasters from a rigid and quasi inactive organization.

Anne Khademian sums up the key lessons from these examples for work place culture reformers.

First of all, you have to thoroughly and fully understand commitments and how they reflect the environment. Secondly, as a culture leader and manager you shall (and this is a must) think about needed changes to be made within the organization. And finally, you will need to adequately articulate those changes both internally and externally. The external part must be not neglected. This part is as important as the reforms you are carrying out inside the organization. This is the main reason why Anne Khademian tells us that “Reformers must be both incremental and relentless in their efforts” (p. 87).

Later chapters continue with the derivatives that come out of the hypotheses and ideas that she is trying to prove in the book. They may be seen as somewhat less original than the previous parts, but certainly they cannot be deemed less useful.

In chapter four we will discuss more complex approaches to culture management. These are what Anne Khademian recalls as the ‘to-be-avoided’ approaches. This is the case of the practices implemented in the South African banking regulators and, especially, the Police Force. Apartheid created a huge divide between races and cultures in South Africa. The cultural management programs initiated after the election of Nelson Mandela as President of South Africa aimed at bridging this gap and to integrate black people into structures of society that they had never been part before. Unfortunately, these approaches turned out to be highly complex and did not achieve the end results there were intended to achieve. This experience could be very useful to cultural management students who are in their first steps of studies or even new readers of the field.

This is an interesting critique and very compelling but may have worked better either in the previous chapter, three or in the conclusion. If it was allocated in chapter three it would have provided the reader a very interesting and insightful contrast between the models that Anne Khademian takes as “good examples” and the ones that must be avoided in the future as “not so good examples”.

Continuing, the next chapter presents the reader with a very useful guide to Richard Fenno’s “soaking and poking” participant observation approach as a prelude to culture changes. In this chapter the author provides a good checklist for the would-be reformer and manager of the future. It is interesting to note that given its structure and quality this chapter can stand on its own, and it is sure to help many new (or even long experienced) public managers increase their quality of performance.

### - **Conclusions**

Anne Khademian concludes her work by summarizing the leadership lesson gained from the three cases mentioned in the book. According to the author there are three main points that every student of culture management should consider. Their implementation may seem to be hard and many managers may refrain to implement them but it is only through them, Khademian pretends, that real change could be achieved. In order to change significantly the organizational culture a manager has to change the link between the company and internal-external regulations. According to Khademian, an important change is that of the relations with the main constituent group of a company; its labor force and the ‘traditional’ way the work process have been pursued.

In short, one can say that the obstacles that seem to make public organizations impervious to change can (and must) be overcome by the strategies and methods the author describes especially in chapters two and three. The changes in managing theories and resolutions contradicted conventional wisdom for reinventing government performance.

We have to acknowledge that Anne Khademian in *Working with Culture* offers a quite insightful amount of “new wisdom” about how public agencies should work and how to get them going in new directions. Definitely, this is

a book that will help both students and managers to have a better understanding of organizational culture and promote the cultural change necessary to improve a specific organization.

Yet, one must be fair and cannot acknowledge the fact that Anne Khademian leaves a good deal of knowledge out and unexplored. It is important to mention that traditional analyses of organization culture--such as Herbert Kaufman's *The Forest Ranger* and Anthony Downs' *Inside Bureaucracy* and Ouchi's briefly noted *Theory Z*--emphasize the role of personnel policies, particularly recruitment, training, promotions, and transfers in shaping organization culture.

Unfortunately Anne Khademian fails to consider them in her work and does not use or refer to them. But there is still yet another important problem to be noted. In the federal government, geographically dispersed managers all across an agency often are uncertain about proper and improper behavior from an unexpected promotion to a choice assignment, or a single exile to a "turkey farm." *Working with Culture* discusses training a bit in the cases (pp. 66, 128, 129), but it has almost nothing to say (p. 70) about other personnel practices.

Similarly, Khademian does not use the burgeoning team-building and managing diversity literatures, even though these have a great deal to say about culture and culture change.

One must not forget that James Lee Witt was not alone. Who made up his team? Some of the best discussions of culture change have come out of the military, but these too go unused as well.

Also, working with Culture needs a more robust discussion of the qualities that make culture change more or less possible. All three organizations that are profiled were to one degree or another in crisis, but how can leaders change public organizations not in crisis? And do insiders or outsiders better accomplish change? FEMA Director Witt and Assistant Professor Reardon were outsiders, but Chief Pastore was an insider. How did this shape their tactics, and what might that say about the role of outsider political appointees in public organizations? It may be particularly difficult to change the strong cultures of street level bureaucracies, making insider leaders more effective and more credible as change agents in police departments.

Khademian too often describes success narrowly as an operational based process of reaching out to stakeholders. The question that rises here is what about results? Trash pickups were restarted, but did unemployment in East St. Louis go down? Did crime in New Haven decrease? FEMA has had success pleasing clients with rapid payouts and good customer service, but Witt also wanted to prevent disasters. Has FEMA succeeded in changing building codes or reducing construction in floodplains?

Unfortunately we must acknowledge that these questions go unanswered.

Despite these flaws, Khademian's well-written and insightful book has much for both academics and practitioners. *Working with Culture* offers clear thinking, good accounts, and many of the tools public leaders need in order to shape their organizations.