

Transformation in Local Government

Municipalities must sink or swim, adapt or fail, as old systems are being challenged by new realities

Sink or swim. For more than a decade, a fundamental social change or “shift” capable of tossing the unprepared into the maelstrom has been growing in communities, businesses, NGOs, and government. Pick your label – the “social age” or “knowledge age” – old systems and processes are being radically challenged from both inside and out. Rapid technological advances, changing demographics, advanced networks of global economics, and the “instant community” of social media have piled on to create what David Emerson¹ calls a “tectonic shift” to the public service.

Managing the Shift

Public sector leaders ignore this at their peril; Emerson warns that we could soon become “policy dinosaurs” if we cannot fundamentally increase the speed and responsiveness of decision-making processes required by our community and elected officials. We’re in the shift now. It is hitting hard and fast, calling for wholesale transformational change at all levels.

Folks are paying attention to this. In Ottawa, Destination 2020 is an extensive public service consultation about the future of the public service headed by Wayne Wouters. Twitter hashtags #cpsrenewal and #gc2020 track dialogue related to renewing

agility, trust, and change in the public sector.

John Wilkins² gives indicators of “the shift” including evidence that “people have never been more dependent on government; there is a deficit in public trust, consultation, and advocacy, which makes it easier to mess up; industrial age regulation is failing in the modern digital era; people must make it happen where government obstructs progress.”

There is significant discourse available on this topic. To think we’ll successfully address this shift with incremental isolated “re-sets” of government systems is insufficient and serves to only repeat the safe, “tinkering around the edges – muddling through” tactics that failed to position government for success. I think we should press to see public sector leadership from *all* levels of government.

So, what should we do about this at the municipal level? I think we are in a good situation for embracing and provoking necessary change. Why? Because responding to the shift requires leaders to be grounded by a

direct community promise – a true north on a leader’s compass.

Making a Difference in Guelph

Since 2007, in Guelph, for example, the promise has been “to be the city that makes a difference.” In a constantly changing world, the leadership knows that we must match and surpass the evolving expectations of residents and partners to remain relevant and vital. It’s a hard truth.

Guelph is striving to be a complete, sustainable city: a city that is gaining its assertive maturity and greater voice in advocating for its citizens. The city knows it must constantly transform, and it innovates and pilots “next practices.” It’s part of the community DNA. The corporate strategic plan 2012-2016 identifies a range of actions that address the “tectonic shift” and serve to make the city even more adaptive, agile, and enterprising.



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1 Kayhryn May, “Public servants risk becoming policy dinosaurs, David Emerson warns,” *Ottawa Citizen*, May 16, 2014.

2 John Wilkins, “Fellowship of the Ring: Government and Civil Society,” *Canadian Government Executive*, June 21, 2014.

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Adapt or fail. So how does this affect local leadership? Leonard Cohen's quote rings true: "If you don't become the ocean, you'll be seasick every day." If you are not actively working on moving forward, then prepare to become extinct. Our elected officials look for fast, bold, honest, and pragmatic staff recommendations and advice and we strive to behave in a manner that supports this.

Transformation Strategies

The following are draft observations from the ground, on what public service leaders require to address the shift and to transform.

Be open, share knowledge, and provide context

The "knowledge is power" days are over. Knowledge isn't a commodity that can be kept to oneself to maintain power. It may serve in the short term as a tactic, but sharing is required to create solutions to complex problems and issues. The community is tired of withholders. Share it.

You'll feel vulnerable sharing data and there are responsibilities to be sorted out with all parties involved, including the media.

It simply isn't good enough to "just release data" either; you need to connect the dots – provide a narrative, context, and shared understanding of the materials. Is this really a new skill set for leaders? Or, is the sheer amount of data and the complexity of pulling things apart and putting them back together again a revised talent? Likely so.

This drives organizational change that feels like risk. Sharing informa-

tion causes city hall to feel that it has turned itself inside out. In doing so, it makes local government much more porous with its community – creating a "new normal." It's well worth it!

While it will be rocky at the start, sharing will rebuild trust, ownership, and pride in service. Folks will see themselves in public decisions, building recognition, representation, and belonging to the democratic process and common ground. We can anticipate that more active participation and informed discourse will ensue (the reason we are focusing on open government in Guelph). Trust is two-way though and this will take time and practice.

Let go, listen deeply, grow empathy, and lead from the heart

Though not easy, municipal leaders must let go of old constructs that no longer serve. Letting go and creating new requires deep listening, a deferral of ego, and a focus on the *we*, not the *I*.

Leaders must embrace each other, as well as outsiders – people who don't necessarily fit into standard job descriptions or public roles. Leaders must create and act as a bridge for cultivating a new empathy and drawing *all* into the work – elected officials, citizens, guests, and staff. This requires your "soul" to be in your work.

Create a culture of "safe-fail" and courage

In the public sector, failures are often handled in the public domain. Embarrassment and humiliation are root fears. Harsh critiques handled poorly only exacerbate a tendency towards complacency and a lack of ownership for responsibilities.

It's pretty noisy in the middle and it's a tough obligation to learn to be comfortable standing in open space with courage to face what can sometimes be unfair criticism. Jon Gnarr,³ the former mayor of Reykjavick, said, "It is so easy to have an opinion when you don't have to take any responsibility. Responsibility changes everything ... and the thing with responsibility is that it isn't popular. Nobody wants it; nobody likes it."

Senior leaders must stand side-by-side to tackle a new idea together, creating safe-fail practices.

Be bold, creative, and disruptive – and drop the perfection

Leaders must be bold, creative, and at times provoke or disrupt the shaping of a city. Patrick Hanlon⁴ asks, "Who is your Chief Disruption Officer?" I wonder if we need a ratio of CDO: CFO: CAO. In Guelph, we asked our employees to:

- ▶ be bold, frank, and fearless;
- ▶ be fully engaged and build direct relationships with all our stakeholders; and
- ▶ communicate changing approaches and new ideas in all directions.

What might this look like? You'll know when you see it ... Let the perfection go, this work is messy.

Be informed and part of the community

Develop a community of colleagues to support you. No one person alone can lead transformation in

³ Jon Gnarr, interview with Jian Ghomeshi, Q, June 19, 2014.

⁴ Patrick Hanlon, "Forget innovation: Who is your Chief Disruption Officer," *Forbes*, March 20, 2014.

the public service. Vince Molinaro⁵ wrote: “The idea of the lone hero who can save us all was yesterday’s model of leadership. Today, we need to build a strong community of leaders.”

Make time to read and explore what is happening elsewhere. It’s an obligation of leaders to understand the context in which we live and work. Twitter hashtags #cpsrenewal #cpsr #localgovcamp #opengov #gc2020 are places to start.

Pause, breathe, and be open

It has been said that “Good cities react to opportunities, but great cities plan and create opportunities.” This sometimes gets lost in the midst of the daily push and pull of leader responsibilities, issues, and dialogue. A practice of remembering to pause, stand back, refocus on the proverbial horizon line, and breathe is also growing within the next leadership.

Observing them, they appear to be laying down new cornerstones for the next iteration of the public service. I see this in the work of open govern-

ment. A broad range of people are planning and creating a new dynamic. I hope this work spans across governments to include elected officials, community partners, and businesses.

I stay optimistic. We’ll continue to see more responses to “the shift.” The current and next generation of public sector leaders are sharing mentorship and coaching across sectors. I hope that, together, we will respond to Emerson’s concern about becoming policy dinosaurs with a bold, saucy statement: #NotOnMy-Watch! **MW**

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