Joined-Up Government – Overview of Main Issues

Background paper for the videoconference on “Public Sector Transformation Towards Citizen-Centric Joined-up Government: Lessons Learned from UK and India”

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PROGRAMME BACKGROUNDER

Introduction

Joined-up government denotes public service agencies working across portfolio boundaries to achieve a shared goal and an integrated government response to particular issues. Approaches can be formal and informal. They can focus on policy development, program management and service delivery.

Goals of Joined-Up Government

Joined-up Government has at least four underlying goals. The first concerns the wish to eliminate contradictions and tensions between different policies, and is therefore aimed directly at increasing the effectiveness of policies.

The second goal behind joined-up government is to make better use of resources, through the elimination of duplication and/or contradiction between different programmes.

A third goal is to improve the flow of good ideas and co-operation between different stakeholders in a particular policy sector, thus producing ‘synergy’ or smarter ways of working.

A fourth goal is to produce a more integrated or ‘seamless’ set of services, from the point of view of the citizens who use them. Thus a ‘one-stop-shop’ may enable a resident to pay local taxes, get information about improvement grants, access local public health services and get advice from a Citizen’s Advice Bureau, all at the same premises. Or a well-designed website will enable the citizens who use it easily to transfer their search to other websites belonging to other public agencies or services that may be of interest to them.
What is Connecting Government All About?

At its most simple connecting government is about working collaboratively with officials in other portfolios – finding ways to integrate policy and programmes between portfolios and achieve more efficient and effective implementation and service delivery. This can be both within governments and across governments.

It signals an important paradigm shift – where public servants move beyond agency-bounded limits to their thinking and embrace problem solving that is integrated, efficient and focussed on achieving shared outcomes across portfolios and across jurisdictional boundaries. It is the shared outcomes and the collaborative working style that make it unique.

The drive for a whole of government approach to how we do business isn’t a new mantra. In fact it is the “philosopher’s stone” of public administration with governments dating back to the Roman Empire striving to improve horizontal integration.

Connected government, whole of government, joined-up government, - whatever its label – does include the things we’ve done in the past - like task forces and interdepartmental committees.

What, then, is different about what we’re striving for now? The difference, is the imperatives driving what we’re doing now. In the not too distant past, public sector reform has tended to be driven by a desire for savings and efficiency. That’s not to say we’re not interested in savings and efficiency anymore – on the contrary – but the imperatives driving whole of government, as we understand it in the 21st century are more complex.

The public sector has undergone reforms – adjusting its ‘fit’ to a changing society. A society where economic, social and technological developments have given rise to new problems, new capacities and new relationships between citizens and governments – an environment in which an educated and empowered citizenry are said to be looking to amend their social contract.

At the same time governments around the world have relinquished control of some of their key economic levers by, for example, floating their currencies and deregulating their financial systems. They operate within the constraints of a global economy, and are no longer the masters of their own domain. Consequently they have to use an interacting set of complementary measures to achieve the same goals. For example, the Government can no longer directly manipulate interest rates in order to increase workforce participation. They must, therefore, look to a range of intersecting measures - education, training, childcare, health, income support and mutual obligation, for example, which are tailored to the particular circumstances of individuals, to achieve the same ends. Clearly, these sorts of interconnected strategies can only really be successful with a whole of government approach.
Today, interconnected strategies have to be delivered through a more devolved set of arrangements, including the privatisation of some previously government business, a shift from direct service delivery to regulation and contracting out and the creation of quasi-markets – essential tools for modern government as it responds to changing needs and capacities in society.

However, reform – especially devolution and regulation – has been accompanied by fragmentation at the periphery of government and a real increase in the complexity of government business. A corollary of this has been the obscuring of lines of authority and accountability between departments (at the centre) and other government agencies.

Joined-up government activity, then, is about how we respond and adapt to the complex and challenging environment of modern government – how we remain relevant in a new and fundamentally different world. It is not a single instrument, for, say, collaboration on service delivery. Rather it is a cohering principle, necessary to maintain our sense of government as a consolidated entity, a single system that can be worked upon to deliver the outcomes expected by the government and the community.

The driver of all this is that to stay alive we need to see ourselves as a single government system or entity that is delivering government-wide outcomes.

The public sector is struggling with the shift from government in the industrial age (hierarchical and agency-centred) to government in the information age (less-hierarchical and citizen-focused). While existing technologies give legislators and public servants the power to transform almost everything, their thinking has not yet caught up with their technological tools - the industrial age mindset lingers to the detriment of public policy.

Not everyone has cottoned-on to the speed at which things are moving – enabled by technology – and how responsive we need to be to government and to the community. In the past the outcomes we are now looking to achieve from whole of government activity were mostly pursued through organisational restructuring and machinery of government of changes. What’s new is that today’s whole of government approaches tend to look primarily to the development of organisational cultures, capabilities and relationships that support, model, understand and aspire to whole of government solutions.

Joined-up government collaboration should be about how we operate every day:

- how we communicate as a public service, between levels of government and with the community
- it’s about integrated policy-making and how that translates into service to the citizens, and
- it’s about how, in doing these things, we manage the complexity that is inherent to what we’re trying to achieve.

**Change in Organizational Culture**
The challenge, then, is how we develop organisational cultures where whole of government approaches represent the day to day reality? How do we capture and translate what we have learnt from others, into the practical actions, capabilities and the behaviours of our staff? How do we get connected?

This can be described as “weaving together” the vertical and horizontal aspects of government, with the vertical being governance within government organisations which face the challenges of greater clarity of roles and accountabilities, and the horizontal being connecting out to other government agencies and stakeholders, with the challenges being when, why and how to connect government with citizens and how to manage related accountabilities.

Connecting government demands collaboration and collegiality by all participants, while attending to the particular responsibilities of their agencies; it must be coherent and robust – despite the layers of complexity. Getting an upfront joint understanding of, and commitment to, shared outcomes, responsibilities and accountabilities is vital.

This can only be achieved by developing organisational cultures and governance arrangements where collaboration is a given; the capabilities to work across organisational and jurisdictional boundaries are in place; and the national interest trumps individual agency interests every time.

Project management, contract management and financial management are becoming increasingly important for the delivery of whole of government programmes on the ground. Negotiation and relationship management skills are fundamental for the collaborative work involved.

There remains, nevertheless, a really important place for sound research and policy development within agencies and we shouldn’t lose sight of that. Good joined-up government work requires good work back in departments developing good policy; just as effective delivery requires good implementation by responsible agencies. What joined-up government activity isn’t about is letting go of the reigns – of handing responsibility on. It’s about fulfilling your share of the bargain.

Who is Responsible?

One needs to take responsibility in his/her individual jurisdictions and in each of the agencies. Working from a joined-up government perspective is increasingly seen as central to the capabilities required of leaders. For those at the executive level this is assessed within the framework of the Integrated Leadership System, and for the Senior Executive Service it is assessed within the framework of the Senior Executive Leadership Capabilities framework. Both frameworks are structured around five capability clusters:

- shapes strategic thinking
- achieves results
- cultivates productive working relationships
- exemplifies personal drive and integrity
- communicates with influence

Just as leaders in the Public Service are required to model the values, they are also expected to model behaviours and approaches that support joined-up government outcomes. This is particularly important in the devolved environments that we now operate in. One can’t afford to be fighting turf wars – agencies will retain individual responsibilities, but those responsibilities need to be discharged in ways that realise the benefits of collaboration.

The momentum for joined-up government activity has to come from our leadership – but there is a crucial and strategic role for HR areas to ensure that the policies and processes are in place to support a culture that is focused on whole of government outcomes.

Of course the Secretary, or General Manager will be setting the direction of the agency, looking for opportunities to build collaborative capabilities and identifying problems that require collaborative solutions. But the HR areas in our organisations need to develop ways of making it happen, by implementing integrated strategies that support and mutually reinforce each other.

Can you image an agency where the Secretary says “we are going to become the leaders in adopting a whole of government approach to the way we do business”, but the people management practices do not reflect this vision:

- HR practices are not aligned or integrated
- learning and development doesn’t reflect a focus on joined-up government capabilities
- joined-up government capabilities are not considered when recruiting
- business planning strategies do not include the potential impact of increasing whole of government collaboration
- performance management systems do not recognise or reward joined-up government behaviours
- Information technology systems won’t work with those of other agencies or data collection won’t link-up.

Is this agency going to be a leader in the drive for connected government? Not likely. So, how do they get there?

Leadership is crucial. But beyond leadership, connecting government is about people, culture and capability. The public sector is subject to a vast array of internal and external factors which demand a joined-up government response if we are to remain relevant, and importantly, if we are to achieve the outcomes desired by government and expected by the community.

We need people who are adaptable, flexible and collaborative – these are the ingredients for connecting government, and, more broadly, for realising our potential as a public
sector – at a time when what is expected of us is greater than at any time before, and what we’re capable of is not only greater than ever before, but still to be seen.