

Stretch Goals: A Case for Government Agility

Sandra Pupatello

Agility in government requires one element that has, ironically, been in short supply in this globalized, hyper-connected environment: a tolerance for risk within the public sector. But as former Ontario minister and current PwC leader Sandra Pupatello writes, solutions are already in the making.

On the topic of government agility, there are some agreed-upon facts. For one, Canada's public sector is, by measures, becoming more agile. Citizens expect seamless, integrated services brought to them in the ways they see fit. These challenges are starting to be met. Second, stakeholders agree that governments need to do more to become increasingly more responsive to the needs of the public. The world is being shaped by technology and ever-increasing globalization. Everyone must do more with less, however, so governments require efficient and effective ways of delivering on services. And third, there are plenty of ideas on the table, but ultimately no one is quite sure just how to kick start a widespread change.

In the context of the public sector, the current environment contributes to a slower pace of change. There is a low public tolerance for error, and a high avoidance of risk within the public service; every action has its equal and opposite reaction. Unfortunately for Canadian governments, that means that transformation into agile, responsive service faces challenges.

Should we even want agile government? Overwhelmingly, the belief from within the public service, is "Yes". In fact, in a recent report jointly produced by PwC and the Public Policy Forum—*Agile government: Responding to citizens' changing needs*—91 per cent of respondents said they believe that agility is achievable. And 75 per cent of participants said that the public service needs to be less risk-averse in order to be more agile. So, what concrete things need to happen to bring about a less risk-averse culture in government?

Someone asked me: "Is there a single way to shift into an agile frame of mind? Can a government just say, 'This is what we're all about now'?"

In short, no. But there are ways to make what's already happening more obvious. The reality is, governments have been dealing in risk all along, though by small measures relative to what occurs in the private sector.

In the private sector, a CEO might say "we're going to try something new, and we don't know what the result will be just yet; we might even fail." The CEO can fairly safely plant that signpost in the ground, and as a re-

ward, they'll be labelled as an innovator and a forward-thinker. If a government leader shows that level of bravery, the public response is usually in the form of swift backlash concerning misspent tax dollars. Government appeases public anger by trying to guarantee outcomes, and thus, stays on a narrow course, void of flexibility and innovation. This is obviously contrary to the whole idea of agility being able to provide a more nimble, responsive service base, which 75 per cent of the report respondents say is necessary for success.

Governments are very calculated about their risk-taking ventures. Public perception about how money is being handled is critical. But what if a government announced that they would be earmarking a percentage of their annual budget for risk? Governments have to make thousands of decisions every year, across many ministries and services. They aren't always going to go right. If these service areas could be allowed to have a budgetary amount that could, as a loss, be accounted for, then perhaps the public would feel less affronted by the way our tax dollars were used. Government "waste" could become government "risk".

The term "working in silos" is often applied to the operation of government. Ministries, working autonomously, can miss opportunities to cooperatively achieve their own individual goals. By working alone, they can also miss the ultimate benefit—and purpose—of effectively serving their public. I have seen a highly effective collaborative approach in action while working with the Ontario provincial government. In the late 2000s, the medical devices sector worked with the government on a cross-ministry participation project. Leadership in each ministry that impacted on the medical devices community came to the same table, at the same time. The ministries of health, finance, Treasury Board and Ministry of Government Services, for example, were in the room together with representatives from industry. In this format, procurement processes, for example, could be addressed with government services,

and at the same time the health officials could hear about the regulatory environment and assessment of new medical devices.

Everyone received information in the same way at the same time. No one could claim to misunderstand what the real issues were that broadly affected the sector in question. In a unified approach, we committed to coming back to the table with solutions to key issues. In committing to do the best for the client, government created a bridge between service perspectives, programs and policy to move business forward. The resulting model is Ontario's MaRS EXCITE program, highly lauded within the medical devices community.

The action was repeated with various sectors and industries. The results were transformative, for business and for government. The Open for Business strategy was the result, successfully helping to drive business in the province of Ontario. In terms of agile thinking, one of the greatest benefits this brought to the government was to transform it from a feeling a need to deflect criticism to being a facilitator of tangible progress.

A third area that the PwC / Public Policy Forum Report touched on was that of increasing mobility between private and public employers; that this should be encouraged.

It is common in the private sector to see workers go off on a secondment; gather new skills and new experiences. Government needs to do better in having public service workers move across different service areas to gain broader experiences. As well, having government employees work on secondment within the private sector would be hugely beneficial.

The benefits are not merely a broader understanding for the public sector employee of what makes the private sector tick. There is a critical cross-pollination element as well. The relationship and skills building back and forth between private sector and public can be of great service to both sides, and should be explored more often than it is.

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An increased level of cooperation and communication between elected officials and public servants should also been seen as less of a taboo than it is. As the PwC-PPF report points out, successes should not always be the spoils solely of elected officials, nor should failures always be scapegoats borne in the rank and file of the public service. The current conversation tends to be about an elected government delivering on election promises on the first try, with anything less seen as a failure. Risk and innovation can become part of an embedded culture that educates the public about the usefulness of letting elected officials and hired employees deal with one another more freely.

A spin-off benefit of strengthened relationships between private and public sectors would also likely be increased working partnerships between the two sides. This is a factor in increased agility. Private Public Partnerships (PPPs) are nothing new, but the arrangements aren't always celebrated. More often than not, these arrangements should be lauded as effective cooperation between excellent oversight bodies (government) and an innovative, flexible workforce (private enterprise).

The dated perspective of “them and us” is a roadblock to being able to marry the very best of effective project management with risk-enabled private enterprises. There is a highly sophisticated process of procurement around PPPs. Whomever is selected to do business with government should be regarded as highly competent in the eyes of the public, and the government should be prepared to stand side-by-side with their private partners to echo that sentiment. From the Confederation Bridge in the east to the Port Mann replacement in the west, PPPs have successfully de-

livered infrastructure projects across multiple levels of government and private enterprise. There can be more transparency, more excitement and positive feeling toward these types of projects. I hope eventually, we'll be looking at the future's 'business as usual' as yesterdays 'risks'.

At the end of the day, there's one conclusion: Canadians expect a responsive, intelligent, modern public service. They expect a trim, efficient system where costs are considered and more is done with less. This transformation will only occur at the expense of old beliefs about how the public sector ought to go about its work. We know that the public sector of the future needs to transform into a nimble, tech savvy service to truly be able to respond to the needs of the citizenry which it serves. To do this, old ideals about how a government should operate must be shed. The workforce has to be given the social license to transform into a creative, innovative and adaptable entity.

Canada is often held up globally as a top example of a modern democratic society. But there is more we can do to build on that reputation. The difficulty lies in determining the true catalyst for change. Will it be a government showing courage with a public declaration of embracing risk? Will it be a swift, dramatic change in public perceptions around government should act? Regardless, now is the right time to encourage these momentous shifts, to spark the change that everyone agrees is needed. **P**

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