Public Sector Management

by Norman Flynn

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Reviewed by Ivan Horrocks

Public services have changed dramatically in the last two decades, not least in the area of management. Public-sector managers are now required to operate in a world that few of their predecessors of a decade or more ago would recognize. Not only have management practices and skills had to change—as they have done for managers in general—but so too has the environment in which managers operate. One of the excellent features of Flynn's book is that changes in the practice of public-sector management are set within a broader and deeper examination of the economic, political and social factors that shape the environment in which public services have to operate.

The starting point for Flynn's examination of the changing nature of public-sector management is a wide-ranging discussion of the nature of the public sector in the UK. This starts with a useful attempt to define what we actually mean by 'public service', and what the boundaries are between the public and private sectors. Change is, of course, something that most managers and workers now accept as inevitable. However, Flynn rightly draws attention to the unquestioning rush to change that has driven a good deal of the public sector's change agenda. Particular attention is drawn to the role played in the change process by highly paid consultants and management gurus, and the extent to which many of the changes put in place by 'evangelical' managers have been window dressing. As Flynn perceptively points out: 'If changing the name of a hospital administrator to 'general manager' or from general manager to 'chief executive' does not alter the balance of authority or influence in a hospital so that other people change how they work, the change is trivial' (page 4).

Of course, the reviews, reforms and privatizations that have provided the impetus and backdrop to public-sector change have been largely, if not exclusively, politically driven. Flynn traces the relationship between (party) politics and the public sector from the early years of the foundation of the public services, through the 'golden age' of the 1950s and 1960s, and into the years of conflict and forced change of the Thatcher era (1979–90). He concludes with the reforms of the final Tory administration of the 20th century led by John Major. Importantly, Flynn spends some time exploring the politics of management, and highlights the fact that although the first Thatcher administration is credited with starting the process of 'rolling back the frontiers of the state', it was the previous Labour government that had started the process by trying to reduce public spending. Cuts in public spending are reflected in social policy and this in turn has had a profound impact on management in the public sector. Consequently, public-sector managers have been forced to collaborate less and compete more; to exercise managerial control or influence over professionals; to adjust to the fact that state services are increasingly residual; and to become more concerned with measurable performance (inputs and outputs). However, one of the major problems to confront public-sector managers in seeking to work in different ways is that the initiatives taken are not always consistent, because governments do not necessarily have a coherent idea of management.

Having introduced and explored the context for changes in public-sector management, the second part of this book is devoted to an in-depth analysis of the features of public-sector management that had emerged by 1997. Markets, markets and management, managing through contracts, service design and customer orientation, performance management, people management and organizational structures are all discussed at length. The book concludes with a discussion of 'the future of public sector management' that was penned prior the 'Blair revolution', and thus makes particularly interesting reading.

In summary, this third edition of Flynn's book is an extremely interesting, readable and insightful analysis of the transition of public-sector management from bureaucratic dinosaur to champion of flexibility and customer orientation —well, almost! It is a mark of how rapidly the public sector continues to change —due primarily to the types of pressure and environmental factors that Flynn documents so well—that the book is already something of an exercise in contemporary history. However, there is still much that can be learned by anyone interested in developing a deeper understanding of management and the practice of managing. In particular, the book offers a clear insight into the reality of public-sector management, rather than the hype and hot air too often vented by consultants and advisors. As Flynn tellingly concludes: 'If politicians believe that workers are naturally feckless and idle, managers have to take a particular approach to management that reflects that belief. If politicians believe that the producers of services always act in their own interests rather than that of the users of services, producers have to accept processes of monitoring and control which they might not otherwise prefer' (page 232). As this book clearly demonstrates, in the public sector at least the mantra that managers should be given the freedom to manage is always going to be more theory than reality.

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