Mobilizing Public Administration

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I.   Introduction

„Mobilizing Public Administration": Let me start by saying that the title of this contribution could, at least in Germany, lead to misunderstandings. As many of you will know, we have a great if highly unfair tradition of jokes about public servants: They are said to spend most of their working days glued to their seats and – as it is the rule in the game of Mikado (pick-up sticks) - : He who moves first, has lost.

However, needless to say, it is not the intention of this article to criticise public servants or public administration. These last decades we have seen great change in the organization and understanding of public administration. Public servants today are highly trained experts who need to adapt quickly to new situations and who need a great mobility and flexibility of thought and action. Yet, a lot remains to be done, if we want to prepare Public Administration for future challenges.

The following chapters will show how and why things have changed, why conventional patterns of regulation and governance fail and which new approaches are necessary for unstable environments and unexpected events. Modernization of public administration therefore means the mobilization of public organizations and their acting members, the civil servants (Hill 1999, see also Deeken 1997, von Ameln/Kramer 2007). Just like the muscles of a body which become rigid if we don´t exercise, administration needs to be trained if it is to stay and become mobile. We need to train our public servants and administration as a whole for the purpose of coping with new challenges serving the common good. Mobilization therefore implies a fitness programme that includes external measures relating to organizational structures and processes as well as internal changes in leadership focus and personal development.

II.   Changing environments - Inappropriateness of conventional control mechanisms

In recent years there was pointed out in many publications that complexity, uncertainty and turbulence are growing, conditions are ever and always faster changing and unexpected events are happening (Snowden/Boone 2007, Sargut/McGrath 2011, Greenspan 2008, Farazmand 2009, Coen/Roberts 2012, Taleb 2007). The former secretary of state, Donald Rumsfeld, is quoted with the word of the "unknown unknowns" that make all leadership extremely difficult (Rao 2012). Administrations have to cope with a wide range of sudden crises and catastrophes (Boin et al 2005, Drennan/McConnell 2007, Boin et al 2008, James/Wooten 2010, Fraher 2011), like terrorism, economic and financial crises, natural catastrophes, food pollution, risks for environment and health, as well as creeping changes such as demographic change or climate change.

New information and communication technologies change life and work (Lanier 2010, Shirky 2010, Carr 2010, Turkle 2011, Chatfield 2012). They blur organizational frontiers as well as the division of work and leisure. People do not work in traditional hierarchies and in fixed positions but in networks and projects (Malone 2004, Brafman/Beckström 2006, Gratton 2011). This often leads to feelings of insecurity and partly to a "corrosion of character" (Sennett 1998). The so-called Web 2.0 allows new forms of cooperation (Tapscott/Williams 2006, 2010; Li et al 2011, Boudreau/Ziskin 2011)).

Especially young employees claim Result oriented Work Environments (ROWE). Knowledge workers create new autonomies and expect that their value propositions are appreciated. We have moved from human resources to resourceful humans (Burton 1992, Platts 2011, Fischer 2012). This change of perception implies that we do not see people only as another resource, a means of production or a cost factor but as crucial parts of the value creation (Viljakainen/Müller-Eberstein 2012: 107).

The walls of the organisation are broken. Open innovation provides the role model for open government (Noveck 2009, Lathrop/Ruma 2010). Open processes and open minds need open leadership (Li 2010, Hill 2011b). We also see the dissolution of time constraints. On the one hand we see new concepts of financial management like beyond budgeting (Hope/Fraser 2003, Pfläging 2003), on the other hand we have to cope with communication and decision making in real time (Burstein et al 2010).

Considering these fundamental changes, conventional methods of planning and programming, of regulation and governance have become inappropriate (Hill 2012). Standardization and scientific management are not the road to success when dealing with singular or new, unexpected challenges (Moynihan 2008, Cho 2010). Most of our widely introduced and accepted methods in administrations derive from engineering and economics (Block 2011: 259). They do not include new insights from system theory, neo-institutionalism, implementation research, brain research, prospect theory or behavioural economics. These lines of thought come to the conclusion that linear thinking, direct interventions or rational decision making can not fix wicked issues or intractable conditions (Hill 2012).

The first generation of administrative modernization such as new public management, business process reengineering or quality and performance management were often only "mechanisms of hope" (Brunsson 2006). They often failed because they did not take peoples aspirations and interests into consideration. Sometimes these management theories only led to accidental change but theses changes were not sustainable as they were not internalized in minds and structures. Sometimes they even led to the establishment of new bureaucracies (Hill 2011a).

If environments, working conditions and human attitudes change (Hill 2007, 2008), leadership can not hold on to old concepts. Administrations in transition call for new models. Jocelyne Bourgon has pointed out that while in a foreseeable world compliance and performance are appropriate methods, a world that is characterized by unforeseeable developments calls for emergence and resilience (Bourgon 2009, 2010).

III.   New approaches

Karl E. Weick and Kathleen M. Sutcliffe have spurred the way with their work on "Managing the unexpected" (Weick/Sutcliffe 2007, Sutcliffe/Christianson 2012). They recommend three principles of anticipation: preoccupation with failure, reluctance to simplify and sensitivity to operations. These principles do not only fit high reliability organizations (Badke-Schaub et al 2008, Gebauer/Kiel-Dixon 2009, Gebauer 2010) but also ordinary administration. Mindfulness is needed in all times and situations, this is why these principles do not only apply to the prevention and management of crises.

Other scholars use similar or related strategies to cope with the "unknown unknowns". Organizing around opportunity (Vogt 1993), Complexity-Based Leadership (Dyer/Ericksen 2010, Uhl-Bien/Russ 2011), Risk-Taking (Girortra/Netessine 2011, Kaplan/Mikes 2012) and Proactive Practices lead to entrepreneurial thinking (Kim 2010). Design thinking (Brown/Katz, 2009, Lockwood 2010, Plattner et al 2010) combines insights from reality with creative thinking and tests of prototypes. Presencing, a term coined by Otto Scharmer, combines the present with sensing and means to lead from the future as it emerges (Scharmer 2009).

Adaptive Governance shows the way beyond scientific management. It integrates science, policy and decision making (Brunner et al., Reeves/Deimler 2011, Harford 2011). Agility revolutionizes classic processes (McCann et al 2009, Worley/Lawler III, 2010, Haneberg 2011). An agile organization is characterized by its ability to perceive an opportunity or a threat, to prioritize its potential responses and to act efficiently and effectively (McCauley 2010). Adaptability and agility lead to a resilient organization (Hamel/Välikangas 2003, Seligman 2011). Resilience is often defined in terms of a capacity to bounce back from adversity (Margolis/Stoltz 2010, Caza/Milton 2012). The challenge is to take resilience into the workplace (Dewe/Cooper 2012: 127).

We do not so much need core competencies for stable environments but rather dynamic capabilities (Teece et al 1997, Teece 2007, Schreyögg/Kliesch-Eberl 2007, Danneels 2008) for changing conditions. We need the capability to act and to create public wealth in situations that are unexpected and confront us with unknown challenges. If we expect more flexibility of thought and action from public administrations, a cultural transformation within these administrative bodies is needed. But, as Richard Barrett notices, organizations don't transform. People do! (Barrett 2006: 4).This is why we not only need leverages for changing external working conditions if we want to mobilize public administrations. More than anything else we need strategies that change our perception and attitude towards the work done by and within public administration.

IV.   Mobilizing resourceful humans

As we have seen, working environments and working conditions have changed. Therefore personal and organizational development can not stand still. Research about Public Service Motivation (Perry/Hondeghem 2008, Meyer et al 2011, Egger-Peitler/Meyer 2011) has shown that the public sector can offer creative tasks and work for the Common Good. This should be the mission for the civil service today and in future (Hill 2006). Powerful thrivers strengthen this basic structure for the improvement of public administrations. These thrivers can be citizens who ask for excellent public services and are willing to make contributions and to cooperate. Thrivers are also the new technologies that allow new forms of collaboration and knowledge sharing.

Mobilizing public administration means to enhance these structures and processes in order to overcome negative consequences of work division such as thinking in the box or silo thinking. This is to say: We need the left hand to know what the right hand does. In many administrations the information exchange needs to be improved. A first step to increase the organizations knowledge about itself is to make regular visits to other departments. Periodic meetings should be held to give people the opportunity to discuss the big picture, the mission of the organization and the alignment of the respective value contribution to the overall success.

Mobility can be achieved by changing positions, alternating tasks or working in projects. Communities of practice and innovation jams foster the search for creative solutions. Decentralization forces us to find differing solutions and to increase entrepreneurial and competitive thinking as well as benchmarking.

Not only structural variations can lead to mental flexibility but also different methods of decision making. This starts with a diverse workforce that provides opportunities for creativity and changing and multi directional perspectives. Furthermore there must be a commitment not to stick to one single way to the solution but to find different ways. The principle TINA (There is no alternative) should be eliminated in a smart organization. Even the flexible management of regulations and provisions should be not excluded. If members of the staff find a better solution than the prescribed way has done the principle of corporate governance "comply or explain" should be valid.

Mental flexibility may be furthermore achieved by gamification. As modern research (Chatfield 2011, Kapp 2012, Stampfl 2012) has shown games are social activities of problem solving and design. Attention and creativity of all players are in many games – and especially in so called serious games - directed to the collaborative mastery of given and new challenges (Stampfl 2012: 107). According to Daniel Pink (Pink 2006), we do have to activate the whole mind to shape the future. The exercise of "life-kinetik" (Lutz 2010, Hill 2012: 122, see also Fradette/Michaud 1998) may be a possibility to interrelate physical mobilization with mental mobility.

In their new book "Well-Being and Work" Philip Dewe and Gary Cooper explain (Dewe/Cooper 2012: 9) how the three forces internalization and global competition, advances in technology and the changing nature of the workforce have driven organizations to focus on economic returns. In doing so, these forces have fundamentally marginalized the social, human, and ethical sides of organizational life. They argue for a new understanding with a broader, more comprehensive view of the work experience, which gives as much emphasis to its positive qualities as has previously been given to its negative qualities (see

also Carson/Barling 2008)). Dave and Wendy Ulrich in their book "The Why of Work" (Ulrich/Ulrich 2010) also suggest a holistic view of organizational work which could thus be more productive for the organization and more fulfilling for the workers at the same time.

If it is right that our perception shapes our attitudes and our behaviour - as for example Paul Dainty and Moreen Anderson have shown in their article "Mindsets for mangers" (Dainty/Anderson 2000, Hill 2001)– then it is very important how we understand and value our work and how it is appreciated by others. Among others Matthias zur Bonsen and Carole Maleh have pointed out that organizations are going to resemble the picture which they create for themselves. We strengthen that view to which we direct our attention (zur Bonsen/Maleh 2001: 22, 41). Unfortunately we focus too much on our deficiencies instead of concentrating on what already exists. Thus we contribute to the sustainment of these deficits (zur Bonsen 2010: 169). Therefore it is time to change the conversation in order to change the culture, like Peter Block, an experienced consultant, convincingly points out (Block 2011: 193).

Changing the conversation means focussing on solutions instead of problems, on talents, gifts and capacities instead of deficiencies (Block 2011: 183 ff., 309 ff.). It further means to focus on active design and shaping the future instead of the mere execution and imposing of standards. Block demonstrates that the problem focus tends to be more rational and logic based. But this emphasis makes it difficult to engage people`s hearts and spirits (Block 2011: 184). Klaus Doppler, a famous German expert on change management, argues in much the same way. To communicate only rationally has the effect that the message is not received. It will then not be able to awake the energy that is necessary to move. This is why Doppler in his new book "Feel the change!" calls for an internal mobilization (Doppler 2012 a, 2012b).

To place the focus on strengths and to value good work performance and positive experiences is the approach of the so called method of "Appreciative Inquiry" Its famous representative David Cooperrider asks the key question : "What gives life to the system when it`s most alive?"(Cooperrider/Godwin 2012: 740) In the meantime there is a comprehensive movement of positive organizational scholarship (Kaiser et al 2007, Ringlstetter et al 2011, Dutton/Glynn 2008, Wright/Quick 2009, in detail Cameron/Spreizer 2012). Many authors try to unlock potential by focussing on positive deviance (Lavine 2012) in order to mobilize organizational energy (Bruch/Vogel 2009, Vogel/Bruch 2012) and to create organizational success as well as personal fulfilment.

Already a lot has been published and a lot of research has been done about motivation. Current publications have shown that external incentives may - in the long run – be contra productive. Daniel Pink suggests therefore in his book "Drive" to look for self-determination, thriving to become better and better (perfectionism) and sense as crucial factors for good and fulfilling work (Pink 2009). Meaning, flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1993) and freedom are – according to Roman Krznaric - the three basic ingredients of a fulfilling career (Krznaric 2012).

Dewe and Cooper see four components of positive psychological capital: self-efficacy, hope, optimism and resilience (Dewe/Cooper 2012: 119). Utho Creusen et al. have even developed a positive challenge indicator to measure the attractiveness of the working place (Creusen et al 2011, Creusen/Eschemann 2012). And Jacqueline M. Stavros and Lynn Wooten suggest a balanced scorecard for positive strategy that does not imply SWOT-Analysis (Strength, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) but SOAR Questions (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, Results). These are: What are we most proud of as an organization? What are the best possible opportunities? What do we care deeply about? How do we know we are succeeding? (Stavros/Wooten 2012: 833).

In summary, Christina Bösenberg and Bernhard Küppers name four criteria for engagement:
- Competency as trust and to believe in one`s own capabilities
- Self-determination as the impression to have a choice
- Influence as the possibility to make a difference and
- Sense as an individual valuable link to the own work (Bösenberg/Küppers 2011: 135).

V. Final remarks

We have to prepare administrations for an unknown future. It is our aim that they will not only function or survive and fulfil sustainably their given tasks; we also want them to be able to cope with unknown challenges and stay capable of acting in unknown situations. For that purpose we need to mobilize both organizations and resourceful humans. In addition to the provision of external conditions as enablers for crafting (Wrzesniewski/Dutton 2001) and creating we have to emphasize the "inner game of work" (Gallwey 2000, Hill 2001) and to focus on the discovery of gifts, capacities and possibilities. With the words of Peter Block: "If what you see is what you get, then look for the strength, and you will find it." (Block 2011: 310)

At the heart of our fitness programme for mobilizing public administration therefore is the look for positive resources like zest, thriving and flourishing (Dewe/Cooper 2012: 131, Peterson et al 2009) that enable and enhance organisational success and personal well-being (Page/Vella-Brodrick 2009). If the "unknown unknowns" are the big challenge of the future then we need new strategies that are able to cope with disorder and fragility. If we succeed in making public administration fit for the future, crises and turbulencies should become a source of new energy and creativity instead of a reason for decline.. Venkatesh Rao uses in this context – following Nassim Taleb – the metaphor of a hydra: If you cut off one head then two others supersede. (Rao 2012).

Only in rough seas you find opportunities to create. And just like all living beings and living systems take delight in their abilities, public administrations should mobilize their potentials to cope with uncertainty and thus move from designability to thrivability (Rao 2012). Then the researchers of public administration will have reason to say with the words of Galileo Galilei: And yet she moves!

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