

Innovation in the Public Sector: Dilemmas in the Use of Ad Hoc Processes

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Abstract

Increasingly, public sector executives are using ad hoc groups and processes—what we term “parallel processes”—as a vehicle for innovation. The central question is, however, when parallel processes are developmental and when they are bypasses that avoid critical issues. This paper reviews some potential weaknesses in the use of such groups by examining several cases that show how they can impede the actual implementation of the innovation. We propose a transitional perspective that regards parallel process as scaffolding, enabling new ideas and behaviors to grow strong enough to eventually allow their transfer to the permanent structure.

INTRODUCTION

Innovation usually requires freedom from existing cultural constraints; ideas often come from outside an organization, perhaps from customers or users, or from a new leader who comes from beyond the historically dominant culture [Gilmore, 1988]. Leaders often create ad hoc structures to develop ideas and plan their implementation. Gordon Chase was one of the foremost practitioners of innovating via bypassing the existing structure. His method, according to Moore [1987, p. 11], was to create a new organizational unit coterminous with the issue he wanted to focus on, place an individual in charge of it, set targets, and monitor its performance. Moore concludes, “he administers the program as though it were a separate, independent program . . . [using] project management techniques” (p. 12). Prominent examples in the private sector include Apple’s development of the Macintosh computer and General Motors’ Saturn car effort. In both cases, new organizations were created and deliberately buffered from the “old” corporate culture (which for Apple was less than 10 years old) so that the innovation would be unfettered by the assumptions and habits of the dominant organization.

The creation of such separate entities may work well for discrete new product or project innovations, but it has drawbacks and dangers when of-

ferred as a generalized model across all types of innovation, especially when the desired end result is a new mission or new organizational culture [Kazanjian and Drazin, 1986]. The now popular “skunkworks” model [Peters and Waterman, 1982] extols either deliberately created encapsulated teams or self-appointed underground ventures as vehicles for the development of transformative ideas. This model frequently runs into trouble during the institutionalization phase of an innovation, however. For example, when the Vera Foundation’s successful pre-trial diversion project was taken over by New York City’s Probation Department, it failed to sustain its performance [Friedman, 1976]. Furthermore, when the focus of the ad hoc group is on the functioning of the organization—its procedures, policies, strategic orientations, culture—as is often true of public sector reforms, the changes that ad hoc groups develop often fail to be completely implemented.

Unfortunately, the choice between what we will term “parallel processes” and vertical processes that use the existing roles and structure of the organization has become increasingly ideological: The former is lionized and the latter denigrated. By parallel processes we mean groups, structures, or events that bypass the existing organizational hierarchy, such as ad hoc teams, skunkworks, special multi-functional, multi-level project groups, off-site retreats, training interventions, and representative councils [Stein and Kanter, 1980; Herrick, 1985; Bushe and Shani, 1981]. As Ware [1977] notes, the very creation of a special group is an implied attack on the existing structure’s inability to deal effectively with the issue.

The denigration of the line organization is particularly problematic in public organizations, given the current climate of contempt for “bureaucrats.” Daniel Schorr [1988, p. A23] argues:

One common thread connects Pentagate, Irangate, and Watergate. In all three cases high administration officials, unable or unwilling to accomplish their designs through the permanent bureaucracy, created shadow governments by using allies in the private sector.

He quotes Melvin Paisley, Deputy Secretary of the Navy, arguing that the Japanese and Germans were competing so successfully against us because “. . . we blew up their government 40 years ago and all the regulations that were in it.” Such contempt for the formal machinery and the corollary love of the back channel can only lead to stagnation and disinvestment in changing basic governmental processes, and to periodic abuse and scandal on the part of the so-called innovators.

The core issue of this paper is how parallel processes can be used developmentally as scaffolding to enable the emergence of something more enduring, rather than as bypass approaches that collude in avoiding difficult issues of long-term change. In light of short-term, appointed executives dealing with long-term civil servants [Hecl, 1977; National Academy of Public Administration, 1985], many leaders will gravitate toward a few doable, politically attractive issues rather than address the fundamental delivery systems of the agencies they are charged with leading [Gilmore, 1988, p. 166]. Furthermore, when systems issues (planning, budgeting, organizing) are addressed, they are often so identified with the particular appointed leader that successors seek to change them just to assert their own control over the agency, thereby short-circuiting any mature learning over time [Lynn, 1977].

Ironically, in the public sector, special units or ad hoc groups are also used both to innovate and to bury "deadwood." Often special units have been created to move a "resistor" into a less damaging, make-work position. Alternatively, a new layer is created for allies, undercutting the authority of the units placed under them. In both cases, the organization is depotentiated by the increased discrepancy between its formal structure and how it actually operates.

We believe that resources are too scarce for an overuse of bypass strategies in the public sector to continue. By far the greatest cost is not the duplication of ad hoc and regular effort, but the long-term demoralization of the human resources as they feel written-off and disempowered. Too often we look at a few special high-performing groups and fail to see the system dynamics that link their overfunctioning to the rest of the organization's underfunctioning. This dynamic is particularly frequent when a new leader takes over, and a small inner ad hoc group becomes ever more active, overloaded, and cut off from key resources; these in turn have been waiting for new leadership, but find themselves treated merely as bystanders. No one has time to orient and direct them; their honest contributions about the existing culture are treated as "resistance." Small initial differences grow and misunderstandings escalate, trapping human capital in the struggle between the in-group and out-group, rather than aligning and aggressively directing all resources toward the challenges the organization faces.

In this paper, we argue that parallel structures are a potentially useful design tool in furthering organizational innovations, but one that can easily become dysfunctional if raised to the level of a panacea. We explore when such counter-structural groups might be established, how they get staffed, what the processes are for managing their relationships to the existing structure, and how and when they get dismantled or integrated into the permanent structure.

We begin by offering evidence from our experience suggesting some of the dilemmas and confusion that surround the use of ad hoc structures. Next we explore an extended case of the creation and subsequent disbandment of a "strategy group." It was creatively used as scaffolding to nurture a new conception of the agency's work and then disbanded to drive the implementation through the existing line structure. We conclude with a general discussion of the issues surrounding the effective use of parallel processes.

DILEMMAS AND DYSFUNCTIONS OF PARALLEL PROCESSES

Parallel processes free people from the existing authority structure, often allowing a creative mixing of people from different levels and functions outside of the chain of command. Yet the results of their creativity must at some point be reclaimed by the formal organization. In a session that focused on creativity in organizations, a group of middle-level executives from a wide variety of organizations addressed several themes that illuminate the difficulties this process raises.

The group was easily able to identify with the creator of new ideas and lionized their value. All the talk about innovators was positive, and no attention was directed at the disruptive aspects of innovation. A question about where new ideas "went" (in their current organizations) triggered widely

shared humor, such as “into the circular file,” or “into reports gathering dust on shelves,” that suggested a foil to the innovator—the bureaucrat who fearfully and jealously guarded the status quo. The informal processes were spoken of positively, the formal negatively.

One person mentioned “executing” a new idea, stimulating the realization that putting a new idea into practice often does involve feelings of loss and death; these arise from the difference between the wondrous idea in the mind when contrasted to what happens when it is realized. Furthermore, to “decide” (which idea to follow) requires cutting off or killing options in favor of the chosen course of action. Those who assume the burdens of deciding and executing—essential next steps after a pool of ideas has been generated—are likely to encounter hostility and be attacked for attending to “political” interests in contrast to the purely substantive concerns of the proposers.

The dilemma this group exposed was this: How can organizations create an atmosphere that encourages creativity and does not, at the same time, lead to the splitting described above? [Miller, 1983]. How does one appropriately kill ideas and yet make their authors no less likely to continue to innovate? In what ways can people who have actively developed a pool of ideas participate in the screening decisions so they come to terms with the limits surrounding the choices? How can a chosen course of action be effectively implemented?

The fascination with stories of organizational insubordination in which an innovative idea has been pushed after being formally killed [Kidder, 1981; Peters and Waterman, 1982] devalues the formal organization and its routines which, when healthy, are the means through which new ideas are ultimately brought into being [Krantz and Gilmore, 1990]. Organizations, formerly valued because they enabled people to do more than they could as individuals, end up being devalued because of how they constrain individuals. But as Sir Geoffrey Vickers [1965] reminds us, organizations are a mixture of constraints and enablers. If the push for innovation becomes separated into two parts—“we,” the creative, informal, substantive, rational; and “they,” the political, self-interested, conservative—the capacity of organizations to do their work is reduced.

Clearly a central issue in the creation of parallel groups concerns the linkages between them and the standing structure. We explore some of the problems through the following case.

ISSUES IN LINKING AD HOC AND ONGOING GROUPS: A CASE STUDY

A new leader was not satisfied with the initiative and creativity of his organization. He created six ad hoc task forces, each directed by someone below the executive staff level and well regarded in the organization: The executive staff assigned people from many different departments to these groups. The result was parallel process, cutting across the major divisions at a level below the direct reports of the chief executive.

As time went on, difficulties in working out the relationships between the parallel process and the formal chain of command arose. The executive staff began to review work plans in order to shape more actively the task force operations. Task force leaders often felt caught between their members, who were eager to move ahead, and the executive staff, who wanted to make sure that the group was proceeding according to agreed-upon policies.

When one task force presented its recommendations to the executive staff, a number of critical issues in the relationship surfaced. The setting was an executive staff meeting presided over by the chief executive of the organization, and the presenter was the task force's chair. Members of the task force and the executive staff attended.

1. How the Commitment to the Work Was Shared Across the Ad Hoc and Ongoing Groups

The task force chair began by introducing the members and briefly discussing their experiences in working together. He asserted that of particular value were "experiences in networking, communicating, aligning their different functions." He denigrated the substantive results somewhat by suggesting that any one person might have been able to go off alone and develop these ideas, but that the process had created some real alliances and shared understandings. He continued:

As I was preparing for this meeting, I kept thinking of this joke about a chicken and a pig in a barnyard, looking up at a billboard that urges everyone to begin each day with bacon and eggs. The chicken says to the pig, "What a good idea." The pig replies, "That's fine, but that's a minor commitment for you, it's a major commitment for me."

He then related the joke to the linking of his task force's work to the executive staff, suggesting that the executive staff faced the major commitment.

Humor often reveals anxieties. Surely the task force chair reversed the roles of his group and executive staff. A central feature of ad hoc groups is their time-limited nature—they have a *deadline*, after which they lose their authority to do work and face the death of their group, which has been a vehicle of satisfaction. Thus they are like the pig who must be devoured for its benefits to be realized. The executive staff, however, lives on, producing "eggs" day after day—some golden, some more ordinary. Might the anxiety about ending what had clearly been a positive experience have led the ad hoc chair to reverse the group's roles? Alternatively, does the reversal underscore that the executive staff does bear the deeper commitment to following through on the recommendations, even though it did not develop as much ownership of the work as those who were centrally involved?

2. Responsibility for Implementation

After reviewing the recommendations, the task force leader said, "We are ready to do educational testing, beginning in June. Other areas will require more resources." Who is the "we"? Is it the task force—which has no operating mandate or capabilities? Is it the employee relations unit whose head is in the executive staff and has not been involved in the development of the plan?

In the follow-up discussion, a member of the executive staff suggested that "good management" meant that the task force should leave with "the monkey on their back for the next steps" [Oncken and Wass, 1974], rather than letting them dump it on the executive staff. Yet, at some point, the task force's work does need to be taken in by the executive staff and re-allocated, often to the line organization. Assuming that it was a good idea to begin educational

assessment, some particular manager would be charged with doing the assessment, within the limits of the unit's resources. That individual would be accountable, and presumably that individual's boss would be responsible, for monitoring its progress. Conceivably the task force could be given a back-up monitoring role, especially to track many parallel initiatives that might exist in many different chains of command. However, if they are the primary point of detecting compliance, then they are taking the formal chain of command off the hook. As Elliot Jaques [1990] points out, few groups are fired. The accountability spine falls along the hierarchy.

3. Struggle for Resources

The task force presented its ideas, but was poorly prepared to give the actual costs of undertaking them. It could not identify slack in current resources (which might have embarrassed the managers of those units that were allegedly underused), or the costs of hiring the necessary additional staff, although it did suggest a number of additional full-time equivalents necessary to do the recommended work in some areas. The members of the executive staff stressed the need to focus on the resources, especially as the annual budget was just nearing a critical period. When the chief executive asked what the task force wanted, the task force leader referred the question to the members with a light comment about, "Let's sit on Santa's lap." The implication was that the decision about resource allocation was the executive staff's and the task force could only express wishes. On the one hand, this suggests a dependency relationship that is counterproductive to the original aims of creating task forces—of empowering middle managers to innovate.

Yet realistically, the line side of the organization had to weigh these recommendations against the resource demands of the other task forces, as well as review the priorities within their area of concern. Finally, the entire developmental budget (for new initiatives) had to be set within the context of the base budget, something that the task force could not know, given the parallel structure.

The foregoing case suggests that the relationships between a parallel structure and the existing organization need careful management across time. When formed, the parallel structure's missions and mandates must be clear—in particular whether it is simply creating options or making recommendations, or will carry forward some ongoing oversight responsibilities. When given authority over an issue that normally would fall under a particular executive's command, it may undercut that executive. When multiple task forces are created, the issue of their overlap with one another must also be managed, especially when each will want new resources for its area of concern.

We now turn to an extended case presentation of how a parallel structure was used as a vehicle of an agency's transformation. We think this case provides constructive lessons about when the parallel process adds value and at what stage the work needs to be transitioned into the existing structure.

A DEVELOPMENTAL CASE: THE STRATEGY GROUP IN THE DEPARTMENT OF JUVENILE JUSTICE (DJJ)

The following case illustrates a successful intertwining of a parallel process with the normal vertical structure in bringing into being an innovation—case

management. In early 1983, Ellen Schall became the commissioner of the New York City Department of Juvenile Justice and recruited a team of top executives, most notably a deputy in planning and an executive director for the detention center. In the first year, she built a strategic theme around the idea of case management as a vehicle that would link the different elements of the agency and thereby provide a whole environment for children whose lives were especially erratic and confused [Gilmore and Schall, 1986].

In January 1984, a one-day planning meeting was held to discuss case management and to flesh out the vision and the different responsibilities for its execution. Numerous outside consultants were present, which was later taken to suggest that the new commissioner did not yet fully trust her own staff to carry this initiative. Parallel processes, such as this one-day meeting, often link outside consultants to organizations in transitions and at the same time serve to keep the consultants removed from some of the real difficulties in ongoing authority relationships. As a follow-up to this one-day meeting, another one-day workshop was held in the early spring. Both events seemed loosely coupled to the actual daily work of the agency; however, line executives were extremely focused on their short-term agendas of getting control over the delivery of safe and humane care for the children.

After one of the consultants summarized his sense of the key achievements from the workshop at a session several weeks later, the commissioner noted, "You seem to have these results much more inside of you than I have them in me." The remark suggested that the two events, which had been widely viewed as successes at day's end, had not been effectively linked to the ongoing processes of the organization. From this conversation emerged the idea of creating a "strategy group" whose membership would reflect many of the stakeholders in the case management system, especially those from the planning unit who had participated in the system's development. This group would meet monthly as a steering committee for the overall refinement and implementation of the strategy; membership cut across lines in the hierarchy and functional divisions in an ad hoc way, determined by the issue rather than ongoing responsibilities. Boss and subordinates from several divisions became equal participants in the discussions. The commissioner would chair the group and one consultant would facilitate the group's process.

A parallel process is typically employed to protect innovation from routine and often involves an elite group of staffers. At DJJ, however, a principle aim was to push very busy line managers toward ongoing focus on the strategic. In contrast to having two groups—innovative staffers in an ad hoc group versus those minding the store—the membership and mission of the strategy group created integrating pressure in participants as they struggled to link their daily preoccupations with the overall strategy.

The group proved to be enormously successful. It set deadlines for work between sessions, became a forum for others to comment on work in progress, and most importantly, enabled participants to be psychologically connected to the overall strategy. Schall felt that it provided a sustained pressure on line executives to think about longer-term issues. Early sessions pulled between the pressure to "fix" immediate problems and the desire to make a difference in the long term. Furthermore, because the group was larger than the commissioner's direct reports, more people experienced her personal leadership.

In subsequent reflections on the group, people noted that during their

meetings they felt less fragmented and were recharged by seeing the bigger picture, as opposed to being overcome with daily crises. Some would mistakenly refer to a previous meeting as having occurred “last week” versus “last month,” indicating the sessions had a vividness that was kept alive. People felt their thinking was respected in this setting, more so than in their daily work.

In early meetings, despite the rich group discussion, the authority for the work was often felt to belong predominantly to the commissioner. At a process level, for example, she often felt that only she worried about keeping the time boundaries. She frequently often had to track assigned tasks to get them submitted on schedule, as if the counter-structural feature of the group undercut its authority to set work for its members directly without invoking the commissioner’s power.

Over the months, however, members became more responsible for managing the time boundaries and assumed many of the process-commenting roles that previously had belonged exclusively to consultants. After half a year of meeting, the commissioner summarized progress this way:

It’s getting easier for the group to be critical (fewer apologies, people less tentative), but non unit discussions are still hard . . . We need to balance the “let’s get it done” instinct with the need to put enough work in up front so we maximize our chances to actually do something and to do it well . . . I still feel the rush of the meeting. The two hours flew by for me . . . We have a lot to be proud of and to celebrate both strategically and operationally.

As her comments indicate, this had become quite a sophisticated work group in which members could confront one another, reflect on the process, balance the need to think with the need to act, and keep work in parts of the organization linked to the overall vision. But these emerging competencies were much more alive in the strategy group than in the organization’s regular meetings. In the late fall of 1984, it was increasingly felt that problems about both preparation and follow-up remained. In the spring, these problems were being resolved, with much of the advance work linked to a off-site retreat (parallel process) that gave the staff a full opportunity to think around the many issues that the new case management approach posed. During the retreat, many of the policy issues reached closure.

At this retreat, the second that the agency had taken, several levels of top management met in a variety of configurations. Schall considered the second retreat much less of a “high,” less magical than the first, which the consultants attributed to the increased ability of the organization to do this kind of thinking within the regular structure, so that the difference between the real work and the retreat was reduced.

After the retreat, the strategy group’s dominant task began to shift from developing and elaborating the case management theme to executing the decisions that had been reached about how each unit would incorporate the strategy. In discussions with her consultants, Schall began to see a relationship between the vitality in the strategy group and the deadness in her staff meetings with her direct reports. Furthermore, she felt the necessity shift from developing the plan to the next challenge: its implementation. In late May, she made the difficult decision to disband the strategy group and reconstitute the forums through which she led the agency. She presented her decision to the staff with the following memo:

When we embarked on this change process here at DJJ, I felt it necessary to create what was in effect a parallel organization to accompany the existing chain of command in order to develop the change and get some consensus on it . . . Due to what I see as the developing strength of the existing administrative units, I believe the agency is in a different stage now and that it is time to merge the change and development efforts into the standing lines of authority and delegation . . . At this point using the parallel organization seems to me to be a disservice to the organization because it tends to diminish the standing lines of communication and the ongoing role of delegation between lines and levels . . . The senior staff, the strategy group and the current management staff meetings will all cease to exist. There will be a final senior staff meeting on May 16 and a final strategy group meeting on May 30.

Appended to the memo were the memberships of each of the new groups, all of which were designed with much more respect to the hierarchy. For example, the strategy group had contained many boss-subordinate pairs that implicitly attacked the unit leader's ability to present upwards the concern of their units and downward the agency leader's concerns. The executive staff now consisted of the top staff of the major units and the corporation counsel; it met weekly and was charged with overall policy direction of the agency. The senior management group was the executive staff, plus each of their direct reports. They met monthly with the charge to work on interdivisional issues.

The decision to disband was taken unilaterally because Schall did not think people would willingly give up the strategy group. Thus, its final meeting was framed not as a discussion of the new system, but an occasion to look back on the experience and look ahead to how it might help them. A summary of the discussion follows:

Schall explained her shift as "putting energy into the existing lines of authority . . . more forthrightly facing the issues of delegation, authority, and representation versus having thoughtful people attend regardless of position."

One staffer, a subordinate of the institutional director, noted that this made sense to him. "I sometimes felt like I double dipped . . . I could work an issue with my immediate boss and get a second chance when it came up in strategy group; now policy will be set above and we will be more implementation focused." However, he acknowledged that the value was in getting to know many of his colleagues in other locations. Another noted it has served to get operating managers to take in strategy as part of their work.

One expressed real regret, that he would have welcomed it being killed early in its life when it was struggling to develop, but now he felt it was needed. This was a definite place to talk about issues. It had been the vehicle of people really seeing his function differently.

Another executive reassured him that he was in her mind when she made decisions about aspects of her work that had interdependencies with his unit. "We have started things here but the group does not have to continue for us to keep this up. We have internalized it now."

One executive noted, "This group has helped me grow professionally and with my staff. I will carry that throughout my career."

The meeting ended with an appropriate mix of sadness and gratitude for the opportunity it had afforded to shape the agenda. People respected Schall's

courage to end something when it was successful rather than have it outlive its usefulness.

The value of the decision was soon realized because it really did establish much greater accountability in the direct lines of authority. Also, once division heads felt pressure to implement the plan and be accountable for it, they focused more on ensuring that the right talent was in place. Several of the division executives made important changes in their own teams. As the commissioner took a risk of including some and excluding others and affirming those who were her direct staff, they in turn seemed to feel her support in them more and thereby became more potent with their own staffs.

The corporation counsel particularly responded to the new set of forums. She was the most long-tenured executive—employed there since the agency's beginning. Despite requests from the new commissioner that she take a larger role than just legal counsel, she had seemed to stay close to her technical role during the early years. Almost immediately after being chosen to be on the reconstituted executive staff, she dramatically expanded her scope, often making valuable contributions on the wide range of issues that the top staff had to address.

We believe that this case represents a developmental use of parallel processes as scaffolding to support new thinking, new strategies, and new behaviors necessary to realize the new mission. The off-site retreats were particularly valuable in protecting participants from the crush of daily problems and allowing them to think about a new mission. Yet the results of such work do not easily redirect a “dynamically conservative” large organization that is often able to be creative and innovative in the service of preserving that status quo [Schon, 1971]. Therefore, the commissioner used one-day workshops to refine a strategy, and when still encountering difficulties in sustaining a strategic focus, she created the transitional vehicle of the Strategy Group. This served as an in-between space that did not let line executives off the hook in developing the plan, as if it would or should magically come from above or from the planning unit staff. Line middle managers could not blame “them” for an unrealistic plan nor could “they” (the planners and top managers) wash their hands of the difficult implementation and follow-through issues.

CONCLUSION

Many of the trends that surround organizations today—empowerment, entrepreneurialism, participation—suggest real developmental difficulties in the vertical relationships. In research we conducted for 3M corporation on effective meetings [Oppenheim, 1989], we discovered that regular boss-subordinate meetings were the most hated, especially when compared to ad hoc task forces. We suspect that one of the reasons is the difficulty that people often experience in collaborating with an authority figure [Krantz, 1989]. In one site that had recently both implemented a major quality initiative and created a parallel council for working on issues of collaboration, a supervisor poignantly commented, “When I want to get an idea to my boss, my best strategy is to plant it with an operator who will then talk with my boss when he is ‘managing by walking around,’ or I will ask the operator to bring it up at one of the council meetings.” This reflection vividly illustrates the interaction of

the two systems and how vertical relationships can become depotentiated by parallel processes. Ultimately, the management machinery becomes toxic and is no longer viewed as value adding. An extreme case came to our attention in work with a factory that was attempting to change its culture and in particular the role of the first line supervisors. One of the issues that had surfaced was the implementation of “just in time” (JIT) in the manufacturing process. The plant manager began to express his thought on JIT at an off-site workshop with supervisors.

Just in time manufacturing, which I like to call common sense manufacturing, is not just a fad. Whenever I see the latest corporate hot button being pushed, I want to reach for the barf bag. We cannot treat this as a fad. You will notice that I am not asking for biweekly reports on which lines have implemented JIT, or putting it into your performance plans. How can you argue with a system that has shorter intervals, puts less product at risk, gives higher yields? It’s got to be yours, it has to be self-generating, self-motivating.

His statement seems remarkable. He is saying because JIT is so important, he cannot use the machinery of management to drive its implementation. If he did use this machinery, people might mistake it for yet another corporate fad. Therefore, the only way he can show just how seriously he is committed to the concept is to not push for it.

What does this extreme example suggest? In the wider environment, the splitting of leadership and management has led to a conception of leader as cheerleader—setting a vision, exhorting the troops, celebrating, aligning, attuning—with less attention to the exercise of authority in ways that might cause harm to others or control or direct subordinates’ behavior. In fact, the dark side of leading is termed management and is laden with contempt—as if it means only bureaucratic systems that arbitrarily interfere with people’s creativity and spontaneity. Management systems are presumed to have the potential to kill good ideas or turn them into fads or purposeless bureaucratic initiatives. It thus follows that an organization’s capacity to involve people can only be preserved by keeping them outside of the formal authority systems, as if one cannot be committed *and* be a follower.

We usually worry about fads: Ideas are only carried in the informal system, while the real work continues uninfluenced by the trendy training or quality circles that are uncoupled to the line organization. It is equally worrisome to have the reverse situation: parallel processes being used to bypass, not to work through, the difficulties that a particular organization is facing. We have seen many instances of the use of parallel process in this mode:

- Detouring a conflict that a boss did not want to address directly into a quality improvement team, with the double cost of politicizing the team’s methods and letting the boss manage by indirection.
- Assigning issues—in this case morale and motivation—that are fundamentally the concern of the line executives to a cross-cut team, thereby enabling the line managers to feel less pressure to worry about the issue because others are working on it; yet the real levers for intervening lie in the vertical organization.
- Creating a permanent parallel structure for line executives to be trainers of their colleagues in areas of planning, time management, negotiation;

as a consequence, people who increasingly hated their regular work could escape periodically to this pleasant oasis, without ever having to take responsibility for their inability to use what they were teaching in the actual running of their own units.

- Creating improvement teams that are highly satisfying to their members because people feel listened to and potent in contrast to their usual roles in which they feel disregarded and overcontrolled.

In thinking about parallel processes developmentally, the challenge is to use them transitionally, as scaffolding, enabling some new relationships to come into being that will allow the dismantling of the supports and a transition to ongoing structure and processes. The appropriate frame of reference is a life cycle, with the significant opportunities for intervention around its initial formation, its leadership, its membership, the boundaries, the relationships to the vertical structure, and most critically its ending.

The use of parallel process as scaffolding resembles the phenomena that Winnecott [1971; Davis and Wallbridge, 1981, pp. 58–61] conceptualizes as “transitional objects” in child development. Early possessions of an infant are imbued with a specialness that enables a child to make a complicated transition such as going to sleep, leaving a parent, beginning school, losing a pet, changing homes. Transitional objects and spaces support working through differences and similarities, and therefore enable someone to manage change from one state to another while experiencing sufficient continuity. One feature of a transitional object is that the child has greater control over it than the wider environment and can experiment safely with it. Winnecott notes that ultimately the intense feelings associated with the transitional phenomena, when worked through healthily, then become suffused over the wider environment.

In this way, we believe that the sequence of parallel processes at DJJ supported key participants in working through a complex change, beginning with a new mission, followed by a strategy, and ultimately linking new behaviors back into the ongoing organizational routines. The disbanding of the strategy group at the right moment in its life cycle enabled people to spread the new insights over the wider structure. Recall the one member who said, “The group does not have to continue for us to keep this up. We have internalized now.”

At one point early on in the new executive staff meeting, after the disbanding of the strategy group, Schall, the leader, raised the question of whether the group might want to meet without her on some occasions. A thoughtful subordinate noted, “What we need is to learn to work together with you and not without you.” This is one of the central issues in the development of innovation in the public sector: to marry thinking and authority.

If we cannot create a developmental theory of process innovation that integrates parallel and vertical processes and if we continue to overvalue the ad hoc versus the ongoing, we run three risks:

1. We will create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because we have no expectations of the regular organization, it will fail to perform, and thus be further delegitimized.
2. We will too easily set up the existing, formal organization to take the blame for the failure of innovative ideas to get implemented, furthering

a vicious cycle in which leaders will increase their use of parallel processes and decrease legitimation of the regular structure.

3. We will forego many of the powerful tools of ongoing management—delegation, appraisal, reward and punishments, control systems—in bringing into being new, more responsive, more effective organizations.

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