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A New Horizon for the Public Service

Myth or Reality?

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THE CALL TO ADVENTURE

Let's speculate. You want to be a public service hero. In your recent efforts, you have noticed a new discourse that transpires around you; colleagues are talking about the need to work differently if we are to tackle the now infamous wicked problems. Some words keep attracting your attention: collaboration, Web 2.0, co-creation, risk-taking, and innovation. To your big surprise, these terms, which are being spoken in a slight tone of veneration are still abstract concepts, almost mythical, and with no real application in your day-to-day work.

This strange new language resonates with you daily, and you feel it is almost challenging you, calling you to the adventure. You are stuck. How can you prove your valour and lend your sword-arm to serve Canadians when what is needed is a widespread

culture change? Your patience is running low, but we, at Policy Horizons Canada, say: Do not panic! What you have been hearing at conferences and between colleagues are only the first signs.

In our own quest for excellence, we at Horizons have been transformed. From a research-oriented unit – some may recall the Policy Research Initiative – we have evolved into a government laboratory where we experiment with new tools and methods in a practical way and in an attempt to anticipate future policy needs.

The first beast Horizons had to slay was the fearsome hydra commonly known as silos. The trick was to make sure new heads didn't grow back. Going through this change brought us to explore what it really means to act as a matrix organization. Staff are not part of a "Division" and do not respond to a specific manager anymore. They are tasked to temporary projects and report for a few months to the project leads.



Opening the silos led to an (almost) natural tendency towards collaboration within the organization, but also with other allies. In just a few months, Horizons staff learned how to work together, getting to know

everybody's strength and interests. Slowly but surely, we also built a new habit of working with our Web 2.0 platform, going from individually-produced reports to shared wikis with no ownership in the traditional sense. Having the chance to benefit from a high performing collaboration platform, we are empowered to reach out and expand our network beyond the organization.

That is, in theory. A new opponent reared its ugly head when it was discovered that a tool is only as useful as the level of skill the user has. We learned the hard way that engaging people is an art in itself and demands effort. All in all, we are still learning just how to do this, but some of our early experiments show signs for tremendous potential; during a course we delivered on foresight across the government, we tapped into the 100 participants' knowledge and expertise to feed into our MetaScan. We can now say with confidence that there is a giant appetite for horizontal collaboration in the public service today.

Our experimentation doesn't stop there. Thanks to the Learning Organization Community of Practice (LOCoP), most of our staff are now practitioners of alternative ways to gather information. Meetings are used as highly productive interaction and/or brainstorming sessions. LOCoP enables us to work together with public servants from other departments in a motivating way, keeping us engaged in a larger community that is not afraid to take risk by, say, organizing a 300 person full-day conference with few or no speakers, and where participants decide the themes and are the actual contributors and presenters.

A USEFUL TALISMAN: THE SPY GLASS

Right about now, you are probably asking yourself: "That's all fine, but what does Horizons actually do?"



Good question. When we are not busy imagining about how the federal public service could be more effective and efficient by transforming itself, we turn to the organization's talisman, our spy glass, and look at what the future may hold. You will agree that in a time where what you just learned is yesterday's news, we tend to become reactive. To stay on the crest of the wave, we need to develop our medium to long-term thinking. This is the main reason why the Deputy Ministers have mandated Horizons with the task of exploring what may be coming. Through an ever-evolving and flexible method, Horizons uses foresight tools to uncover the big surprises that are potentially lurking around the corner by challenging what we assume. And, of course, engaging external partners, experts and fringe thinkers using some of our innovative processes is key to the successes of our work. These tools help us build resilience and capacity when the time comes to face a new three-headed monster.

BECOMING THE TRICKSTER!

Be it Loki, Shiva or Prometheus, in every mythology, a god or a hero plays the role of the trickster, proving that this archetype is deeply rooted in the human psyche. And what is the trickster's main characteristic? He is the player of tricks, he is the agent of chaos; the trickster constantly challenges the status quo so that new world orders can emerge.



At Policy Horizons Canada, we had the chance to find tricksters in our team. Even then, I would lie to you if I omitted to say that there was strong resistance among some players when Horizons was in the making; whether we like it or not, we are all to a certain degree agents of the status quo. Today, we are still coming of age and we are only beginning to see the evolution in our organizational culture. Although we still have a lot to learn – and we expect to be in a state of change as we move forward – the wheels have turned and we are the living proof that change is possible.

So if you think things can change for the better, follow your instincts and have the courage to be more than the average hero: become your organization's trickster!

Policy Horizons Canada is a dynamic foresight organization within the Government of Canada whose mandate is to help anticipate emerging policy challenges and opportunities, explore new knowledge and ideas and experiment with methods and technologies to support resilient policy development. The views contained in Policy Horizons Canada documents do not necessarily represent the views of the Government of Canada or participating departments and agencies.

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PH4-111/2012E-PDF
978-1-100-20781-0

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