

Playing as an Orchestra - Vision 2020 for the Public Service

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Policy Horizons Canada, the Privy Council Office, and the Canada School of Public Service are partnering in a foresight study on the future of the federal Public Service in support to a Vision for 2020. The Vision should allow the federal Public Service to: anticipate change; explore the opportunities that change represents; and experiment with new ideas with the intent to best serve Canadians in the future. A set of six vision elements are being explored in collaborative efforts to develop this Vision. This short piece will set the context for one of the vision elements: policy development in a crowded policy marketplace. As external voices garner capacity, strength and influence, the role of the public service as the foremost provider of advice to government may need to evolve. Watch www.horizons.gc.ca for more as the study unfolds.

Most neophytes, when attending their first concert, ask the same question after the maestro's entrance: "Why is he shaking the hand of that violinist, sitting on his left?" And the initiated concert-goer replies in a condescending tone: "This is the first violin, the concertmaster!" Then the symphony begins and the handshake is forgotten in the whirlwind of sound, voices and rhythms.

Indulge me a moment in building an analogy between a fictional development of

the modern orchestra to policy making. Let's compare the Public Service to that first violin, the maestro to the elected government, the composers to the elected parties, and the music to policy development. Some argue that in the olden days of the Baroque Orchestra, the role of the concertmaster was undisputed. He led the whole orchestra, subordinate only to the maestro. In turn, the maestro relied on him to see that what the composers had produced was respected and often asked his opinion on what minuet or concerto they should play next. The results were good, and most of the public was pleased.

Then, through the years, the public got more demanding and amongst them, new musicians from all horizons slowly found their way to the stage. The modern



orchestra was now bigger, hardly manageable even by the first violin. At first, the newcomers knew it was easier to get the maestro's attention through the concertmaster, but soon they created their own heads of sections. However, some distortion between sections quickly canceled the efforts as everyone was executing a specific opus without listening to their neighbors. The maestro tried to get them to play together, but even the other levels of violins – the twos and the threes – were having a hard time synchronizing between themselves and with the first violin. For a time, the maestro tried to put most of his efforts focusing on the melody of the violins, but as the rich brass instruments, the schooled clarinets, and the demanding cellos and flutes became louder, he noticed the appealing uniqueness of their sounds.

To have the maestro stay attentive to their music, the violins started playing louder and stuck to airs they knew well instead of improvising new melodies. Some of them tried to integrate other instruments to their tune, with limited success. Hearing the building clamor, the flutes reached higher notes, while the tuba and double bass plunged to new depths. The lonesome oboe tried to perform his solo once in a while, to no avail.

Witnessing this battle of sound, the audience could do little else than block their ears while shaking their heads. “When, they thought, are they ever going to play *together*?” Some, feeling betrayed and placing no more trust in seeing anything constructive coming out of the orchestra, exited the theatre in disgust.

Suddenly, the first violin stopped playing. Even though the feedback from the crowd – be it negative or positive – are aimed at the maestro, he is the one facing them and he feels a great part of the responsibility resting on his shoulders. Laying down his bow for a moment, he started listening to the cacophony. Sure, he heard it before, but now he really became aware of it. Instead of feeling discouraged, he saw the potential behind it all.

He started wondering what could be done to harness this immense power. How could he make sense of the discord, and harness the potential that every instrument has? First, he would need to change the culture within his own section: violins need to refocus and rethink their roles. Instead of trying to play louder and faster than everyone, one option could be to acknowledge the heads of sections and reach out to them. The orchestra could sound better if they practiced together and followed the partition. Why, they could even open a dialogue with the composers



and the Maestro. The concertmaster decided that now was the perfect time to do this. Instead of simply adding to the noise, he could try to facilitate the job of both the composers and the maestro by working together with the other musicians. Yes, melodies are becoming more complex, but doesn't that make it the best time to create the most awe-inspiring symphony?

When we think back on the real world, the metaphor is but too real: more voices want to be heard, making the work of the public service ever more complex. How can it stay relevant in this age of information? Does it need to rethink its roles and functions?

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