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The reference for understanding government action

HORIZONTAL MANAGEMENT

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In public administration, horizontal management has arisen in response to the need for greater coordination between various government departments and agencies in order to handle or manage jointly shared problems. In a nutshell, the concept can be defined as the “coordination and management of a set of activities between two or more organizational units, where the units in question do not have hierarchical control over each other and where the aim is to generate outcomes that cannot be achieved by units working in isolation” (Bakvis and Juillet, 2004, pp. 9). Chisholm (1989) refers to this phenomenon in terms of “coordination without hierarchy.” This author in fact advocates adopting informal coordination whenever interdependent units encounter common problems, in preference to the classic strategy of formally consolidating or centralizing authority. According to his conception, coordination is a solution to be implemented rather than a problem to be solved.

Sproule-Jones (2000) has identified three factors that accompany situations in which horizontal management becomes necessary – namely, elements of interdependency between working units, whether they are in or out of government; the multilevel structure within which organizational units operate; and the need for some consensus-based decision making in situations where interdependency between units is high. This author notes that in the literature, the terms “horizontal management,” “managing networks”¹ and “community or research governance” are all used to refer to the same reality. Temporally speaking, the emergence of horizontal management varies considerably from one sector to another. The concept has been a part of academic and public sector lingo since the early 1990s (Privy Council, 1996). However, the thorny problem of achieving coordination between organizations has been around for a lot longer than a decade or two; the difference, now, is that it is referred to under the heading of horizontal management. Bakvis and Juillet (2004) believe that “coordinated government” has been an issue in Canada since Confederation. Bourgault (2000) identified more than 14 different types of horizontal actions, including interministerial committees, consultation and coordination tables, shared support services, and so on. Some of these interventions, such as interministerial committees, have been in existence for years, while others, such as shared services, have appeared much more recently.

¹ However, it is important to distinguish network from horizontal management. As a number of authors have noted, “network” covers a very broad range of meanings. For example, in the view of Assens (1996), “a network is always made up of nodes – that is, points of interconnection capable of emitting and receiving communications, capable of participating in [data] exchanges or structuring transport streams” [our translation]. In the present case, a network can refer to many different phenomena – e.g., a computer network or a business network. With these considerations in mind, it would be inaccurate or misleading to posit an equivalence between network and horizontal management.

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Horizontal management also refers to structural forms that break with those in place under the traditionally vertical type of management. Denton (1991) and Ostroff (1999) have applied the notion of horizontality to organizational structures having fewer echelons than traditional bureaucracy and in which the primary focus is on customer satisfaction. Some authors perceive an equivalence between horizontal management and process management.² Ostroff (1999), for one, has asserted that “the Horizontal Organization organizes around core process groups.” At first glance, this conception would seem to be at some remove from the concerns of public administration. However, with the advent of the New Public Management paradigm³ and the introduction of business process re-engineering in the public sector, this conception has come to apply to the machinery of government. Indeed, out of an ongoing concern with achieving better performance, many public organizations have decided to engage in process re-engineering and to rethink their ways of doing business. It nevertheless remains that these reorganization efforts have not been carried out on quite the same scale as those seen in the private sector.

Both these conceptions of horizontal management – i.e., coordination-based and reorganization-minded – are alike in seeking to break with the traditional mode of hierarchical management as a solution to the contemporary problems of public administration. They are also faced with a number of challenges, including the need to establish a culture of collaboration and trust (Lahey, 2001). In the case of organizations having a number of interdependent activities, horizontal management will entail establishing a climate of trust, to supplant the attitudes of distrust and “turf protection” that previously predominated among horizontal management stakeholders. In the case of organizations reviewing their processes, it will also be worthwhile building trust between work units when establishing processes or initiating a revision of these processes. In both types of horizontal management, the mobilization of actors will be facilitated by due recognition of the need that prompted an initiative of this kind and by ensuring that the timing of implementation is optimal (Peters, 1998). Leadership by senior management will also be a key asset (Lahey, 2002). Finally, concerning specifically the coordination-based conception of horizontal management, a major accountability challenge will arise with respect to managing the boundaries between the home organization (i.e., the department or ministry) and the temporary informal organization (i.e., the horizontal management initiative).

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² Other authors, such as Tarondeau and Wright (1995), prefer to discuss processes from the perspective of “transversalité,” which can refer both to cross-cutting policy initiatives and multifunctionality – that is, the formation of teams that cut across department lines.

³ Hood (1995, p. 95) notes that the following themes are recurrent in accounts of New Public Management: “the idea of a shift in emphasis from policy making to management skills, from a stress on process to a stress on output, from orderly hierarchies to an intendedly more competitive basis for providing public services, from fixed to variable pay and from a uniform and inclusive public service to a variant structure with more emphasis on contract provision.”

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