



## The Creative Bureaucracy: What, why and how

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### ► A changing landscape

New perspectives, new concepts and new priorities can change the way we think, plan and act. This affects how the public administration needs to think through its strategies, policies and actions and how it adapts its regulations and incentives regime. Think here of how the urban planning idea is being superseded by the notion of placemaking or the 15-minute city. It implies working in a cross-disciplinary way and focuses attention on people and the walkability of places rather than giving cars a priority. Consider how climate change priorities shape the decisions of cities in order to achieve one-planet living. The digital pivot and turn exacerbated by the pandemic is another gamechanger.

Here vast transformations are on the way with both positive and negative manifestations. Seen positively it can refresh possibilities to wider citizen engagement, seen negatively it can threaten our privacy.

To acknowledge diversity as an asset rather than a problem and that there can be a diversity divide if conditions are right implies reviewing embedded attitudes, programmes and actions through that lens. It demands that diverse populations require both recognition as well as need to have agency.

Here the Black Lives Matter movement is just one forceful reminder of the immense work that still needs to be done at every level since so much is institutionally etched into behaviour that finds expression in peoples' explicit and implicit or under-explored prejudices, the resulting modes of operating, levels of representations and laws. These institutionalized blind-spots etch disadvantage into our incentives, rules or processes.

Taken seriously all those issues involve dramatic shifts and there is always resistance to the necessary changes required. This highlights what our bureaucracies, a term used in a positive sense, are for. All institutions have ingrained values affecting how they function. The wider argument of the creative bureaucracy is that their contribution to the public interest and common good has been under-valued and that they have been shackled by outdated attitudes.

### ► A trajectory of ideas

Let's take a step back and explore its origins. The creative bureaucracy idea sounds like an oxymoron, but that title was created on purpose and it seeks to signal that 'yes' there are imaginative public servants. The notion involves working towards an organizational culture focused on public value and in so doing generates arrangements, projects and programmes to make that happen. It always asks 'can we do better', 'does the tried and tested still work'. It does not assume everything needs to be thrown up in the air, but instead provides the opportunity to reconsider, to re-evaluate and to re-assess.

The concept fits into the landscape of changed thinking about public administrations and emerged in the early 2000s as a response to the criticism and even vilification of their structures, operating approaches and ethos. There had been pressures to reform for several decades as classic bureaucracies were seen as cumbersome, unwieldy and unresponsive even though they were once seen as rational, objective, benign, effective and modern.

New Public Management (NPM) then emerged in the mid-1980s whose basic values were economy, efficiency and effectiveness with government run as if it were a company and with public services treated as if they were market products and often contracted out. In that process people were regarded as customers rather than citizens so narrowing down the conception of human beings. The managerial style focused on achieving outputs, targets based on measurable indicators.

This technocratic approach driven by control-based performance management revealed weaknesses and led to disenchantment especially for those working in administrations who did not feel they could perform at their best. The re-emergence of the debate about public value was a consequence.

Within that discussion novel approaches emerged such as New Public Governance which argues that governments are part of broader networks, later called stakeholders, and so do not have a monopoly of power. It should thus cooperate with other forces from public organizations, to companies, civil society and citizens. To make things work requires the commitment and alignment of different actors.

A further iteration is **New Public Service**. It starts from the premise that public service should be about the citizen, the community and civil society.

The main role of civil servants is to help citizens formulate their needs and to serve their shared interests, rather than to control and direct society. It rejects the business-like thinking and customer-oriented approach of NPM and differs from the classic bureaucracy in which citizens are seen as rather passive recipients of top-down policy and government services.

In short active citizenship, social involvement and engagement are encouraged. Digital era governance adds another dimension. It both seeks to use technologies to make administrations more responsive and efficient, but also to provide citizens with easy feedback loops and the possibility to co-create policy. From this the notion of open governance evolved. It is both about opening out systems and data as a means of addressing complex challenges. Taking a helicopter view we can detect how all of the approaches mentioned are in play, such as elements of traditional hierarchies, market-oriented thinking, new views of the role of citizens and their engagement.

The creative bureaucracy notion aligns with many of those developments but has a different starting position and priorities. It is framed within and emerges from the notion of the creative city which argues how in a world of dramatic transformation all organizations need to create the conditions for people and their systems to be able to think, plan and act with imagination to solve problems and create opportunities. It stresses that cities are eco-systems and that creativity can come from any source including bureaucrats rather than only business or the digital hipster community.

Within that it takes a positive view of the bureaucracy, in spite of any problems or rigidities it might have. It rallies against the harping on about bureaucratic inefficiency and stresses how focusing on enabling the people within the system can change prospects.

It argues that there is a powerful resource both within the broader community and the bureaucracy itself that can be triggered and tapped by an organizational culture with a shift in focus to a 'yes, if rather than no, because' attitude.

Notably it notes that how the inner life of the bureaucracy works can help or hinder potential and that this, often, hidden resource is neglected. This implies nurturing a culture of openness – combined with emotional intelligence - and a willingness to trial and test, to focus on foresight and to rethink the rules and incentives regime. Crucially, it argues against simplified market thinking and that public value needs to be revalued – a notion reinforced by the pandemic crisis.

### ➤ **The future bureaucracy: Qualities and characteristics**

At its simplest there are three pillars to the creative bureaucracy:

1. How do you establish a rules and incentives system based on values appropriate for our time?
2. How do you help change the inner life of public institutions so that people can operate at their best?
3. How do you establish a new relationships with the outer worlds such as the civic, business and university worlds based on mutual respect.

This organization is more open than closeminded. Within this the wider community is no longer a passive recipient of government services but a co-creator. The contemporary bureaucrat engages and facilitates a wide range of inputs, is comfortable with diverse perspectives and able to reconcile and draw these together in constructive ways.

When we think of innovation in organisations it is often at the organisational, programme or team level. We tend to discount how individual bureaucrats are inspired, how they can influence others, and test and trial new ways of working.

Creative bureaucrats are inspired by problems, crises, opportunities. They look to a bigger picture, champion ideas, see opportunities for positive change and take action – sometimes in a context of personal risk.

Creating something new means challenging the way things are done now. They sense that a problem can be solved and have an idea of how to go about making the change.

Creativity brings a fresh perspective on the possible but implementation needs the support of people across one team or many parts of the organisation especially from the top. A creative bureaucrat can also pave the way for the ideas of others to get through.

### **Looking ahead**

The practice of foresight, imagining how the future may unfold, helps to build resilience if it helps institutions to deal with uncertainty. The pandemic has caused a surge in foresight thinking across governments because, as Alex Roberts of OECD/OPSI says ‘.....there is a big cost to being surprised’.

**Finland** takes foresight seriously. It has one of the only Parliamentary Standing Committees in the world with a focus on the future. Foresight helps it reconfigure skills training and attitude shifts to align with what will be needed for emerging areas of the economy or social life. Finland experiments to test various employment and social programs. Everyone is invited to suggest or participate in experiments through its Kokeilun Paikka platform which is a source of funding.

### **Drawing ideas from the edge**

Cities with bold ambitions seek out ideas not yet part of the mainstream. They are early adopters. They don't wait for all the evidence, they trust their instincts and test and trial. Activists, artists, anthropologists, writers, cultural critics, entrepreneurs may see potential or problems before others.

Early adopters find ideas at the edge and legitimate them. When the diversity agenda initially emerged it was often outsiders that put the issue on the map.

### **Mission-oriented thinking**

Missions are 'problem-specific societal challenges' that public, private and civic sectors engage in. The aim is to accelerate transformational change and create social benefits and innovations. A mission aims to inspire a problem-solving mindset – like open data inspired new ways to represent public data or the Intercultural Cities network and its manifestoes shifted mindsets.

Missions act as the light on the hill. A mission crosses boundaries. It is complex. It is ambiguous and emergent, taking risks or making 'bets' on how to move forward.

As a powerful organising idea it goes beyond a narrow sectoral approach. The aim, for instance, to create carbon neutral city or a just city can be powerful ways to reshape the economy, design or how the city works. Whilst in the diversity context this is complex it can become an innovation vehicle for reimagining opportunities across a wide spectrum in implementing change.

### **Public Sector Innovation is creative capital**

'Public sector innovation models' are also creative capital. They exemplify the values of a place. South **Australia's** 90 Day Projects that encouraged civil servants or citizens to put forward an idea to be addressed within 90 days is an example. Adelaide's Greg Mackie's and his Festival of Ideas has been replicated across Australia and internationally as has their Thinkers in Residence programme where global experts come to the city sponsored by public, private, civic and universities to address an urgent problem practically, but also to inspire. The 'Playable cities' idea invented in **Bristol** now travels the world and it aims to allow people to imaginatively reimagine how our cities could operate by releasing our playful instincts.

### **Tests and experiments**

This environment allows people or teams to test and experiment at whatever level of the organization they operate from. It acknowledges that planning has shifted from a predict and provide mode to one where in a world of inextricably interwoven wicked problems we do not have predictable answers yet still need to plan and act and then adapt as necessary. This means allowing for an element of failure.

### **Life between agencies**

A creative bureaucracy imagines and shows how to steward those parts of an organization, a city or region and especially that life and issues that fall between the cracks of public policy. This is why **Vinnova**, the Swedish innovation agency has developed a major project to reconfigure the role and potential of the street in its support for public life, health and happiness. To do this means breaking down many silos.

### **► Types of creative intervention**

Curiosity, imagination and creativity are the preconditions for invention and innovation and in the context of the public administration It involves creating new ideas that reinforce public value. There is a spectrum of creativity from imitation, variation, recombination, transformation and original creation. So, a usual practice that operates elsewhere is copied and might be innovative in this new context; then one might vary someone else's idea or programme to suit one's purposes; thirdly a new combination of existing ideas might be found say bringing together insights from economic and social programmes; completely transforming ways things are done is a fourth level, such as looking at all rules or incentives and programmes and through a diversity lens; and finally creating something that is a true original creation is very rare.

## Towards an Innovation ecosystem

Over the last 15 years a public sector innovation ecosystem has been emerging across the world. It is largely fragmented, made up of government and intergovernmental entities, living labs, some a part of a municipality and some independent think tanks, specialist consultancies, university departments and public sector innovation networks.

What are the personal qualities of this emerging community of practice? Being more open rather than closed minded and curious is obvious as is a commitment to the idea of public value, the common good and human rights as well as being intelligent people. Less obvious are a series of characteristics, they include: having a listening attitude, believing that imagination is a powerful resource and able to think afresh, being willing to show vulnerability, having a non-hierarchical default position yet realizing that at times hard decisions need to be made, trusting those you bring into your team, being emotionally intelligent, realizing you need to harness the collective imagination to be effective and have wider impact, having an acute sense of when to allow the imagination to flourish and when to close in to implement ideas.

Some are charismatic and strongly outgoing and enthusiastic, but others more laid back and calm. Courage, tenacity and passion however expressed, both generate and keep the energy going and they are driven too to be their full selves. To some extent they are liberated.

There is no one-size fits all, but there is a common ethos involving wishing to empower, wanting better outcomes, knowing that the tried and tested is not always the best solution.

## Storytelling

The creative bureaucracy seeks to both liberate potential and to challenge existing ways of doing things and the ability to create a narrative and storyline with emotional meaning that engages people in different ways can be a powerful tool.

### ➤ A final word

Everyone knows that we are in the midst of a dramatic transformation and the pandemic crisis is causing us all to rethink and to innovate at speed and we see that a business as usual approach will not work. The value of good public administrations has become even more evident. Good government, whether local or national, matters.

To meet our challenges we need an imaginative, adaptive, agile, accountable and trustworthy public administration. This can provide the backbone to address the effects of the global pandemic, climate change, the digitizing world and the need to value all our diversities.

This means we have to acknowledge that there is a hidden and untapped reservoir of talent in public administrations that we should help to unleash; there is a vast number of unsung heroes doing great work. There are many creative bureaucrats who are supporting change in our public bodies and making them much more effective. They are found at every level of the organization. We want to strengthen them and bring them together with others of like mind. We aim at building a movement with international partners across the globe.

This is why we established the Creative Bureaucracy Festival now in its third year. The week long 2020 remote event in September attracted 15000 unique visitors from 89 countries with 48% under 34 years of age and with visitors nearly equally balanced between women and men. This provided us with the sense that there is a movement in the making. See <https://www.creativebureaucracy.org>