Competencies: part of the governance vacuum

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Bad breath isn’t near as bad as no breath at all
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Introduction

In a book published earlier in 2014 (Hubbard & Paquet 2014), we have reported on the results of a large number of conversations with Canadian federal executives, and on what they revealed about the capacity of executives to cope, to engage intelligently, to collibrate and to reframe – operations that might be regarded as gradually more and more challenging in the dispatch of their burden of office. While the very able and motivated executives with whom we had extensive conversations (reporting on their own experiences and those of colleagues) appeared to be handling the lower order challenges not badly, our results showed that they would appear to be less than well equipped to handle the higher order ones.

Some members of this bureaucratic clergy have denied any evidence of counter-performance. However, many executives themselves have articulated concerns, and they have felt that such matters deserved attention as a matter of priority. As a result, some think tanks have launched various inquiries – either focus-group type probing or reflective pieces – purporting to expose the sources and causes of such counter-performance by senior executives of the Canadian public service, and to suggest what correctives might be appropriate.

Unfortunately, too many of these inquiries have fallen into evasive thinking: they have not confronted the current difficulties at the concrete level, but have allowed themselves to indulge in somewhat abstract ratiocinations about these issues.

Evasive thinking is a well-known escape mechanism that Vaclav Havel exposed most aptly when he explained how the press in Prague had reacted to stone window ledges coming loose and falling from buildings – killing pedestrians. Journalists, Havel reports, began by assuring the readership that window ledges ought not to fall, and that it was entirely proper for them to criticize such things, but then quickly drifted into celebrating how wonderful it was that one could speak openly about such things in Prague. Articles would conclude with a challenge to literature “to free itself from all petty, local, municipal matters and to begin, at last, to deal with mankind and our prospects for the future” (Havel 1991, 10-11).

Such an escape mechanism usually leads to abandoning any effort to understand the true sources of the current concrete problems so as to be able to repair organizational failures, and feeds the propensity to indulge in various forms of fudging of the issues or in mystical fuites en avant – all leading to ethereal admonitions leaving the real failures unattended.
Evasive thinking

Two recent documents that obliquely purport to deal with flaws in the preparation of senior federal executives might illustrate our contention. The first escapes the problem of present inadequacies of the senior executives by shifting the debate to problems of individual leadership in the future. The second shifts the focus to an even higher level of abstraction by insisting that the core problem is at the level of the political-bureaucratic interface.

Canada’s Public Policy Forum (2014)

A first intriguing example of this sort of fuite en avant is a recent publication of Canada’s Public Policy Forum (2014) based on the “insights from over 130 emerging and established leaders within and outside the public sector” (our emphasis). The document escapes from the difficult world of the problems of capabilities and competencies of the Canadian federal executives through an elevation of the debates to the fanciful world of leadership, and by focusing on so-called future problems rather than on the ones we face now. It would appear to suggest that the problem is not one of capabilities and competencies but one of leadership. Consequently, it occludes completely the inadequacies of the senior federal executives now, and focuses on the ruminations of these “insightful” persons about the ten top skills that the leader of the future must have.

It is obviously much easier to focus on leaders but this can only be valid if one assumes that if the leadership problems are resolved, then the problems of the organization will automatically be resolved too. This presumes that the organization is adequate and fit to begin with. The only thing missing would be heroic leaders guiding competent followers into doing the right thing. The competency problem is therefore made to disappear by assumption. The table presenting the ten leadership skills elicited from consultation with insightful leaders is reproduced in table 1 (CPPF 2014, iv). The future leaders equipped with these skills would repair any putative flaws in the public service – if such flaws might ever be detected.

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1 We use the word obliquely because of the fact that neither of the two reports clearly admits that senior executives are ill-prepared to do their job well. They only hint that the present situation may be less than perfect or may become so. This subtlety is quite important for it reveals the aura of perfection and holiness that is meticulously maintained about the quality of the federal senior public service.
It is difficult to disagree with the fact that the attributes mentioned in Table 1 might be useful and desirable. The difficulty has to do with the fact that the attributes listed are strictly leadership competencies, and that they seem to suggest that these top-down skills are the only components that matter.

This sleight of hand (through which the competency problems have been transformed into leadership problems) is all the more surprising because it is proposed at the very moment when it has become widely recognized that heroic leadership is dying as a necessary and sufficient condition in all organizations. The
priority is more and more on tackling governing issues not in a Big-G top-down world, but in a small g-governance world where nobody is in charge, and the competencies of all partners are becoming most important².

In the complex world of ours, few (if any) have all the information, power and resources to provide individual heroic leadership (Martin 2000). Information, power and resources are widely distributed over many persons and groups, and stewardship (an ensemble of mechanisms ensuring effective coordination in the manner of an automatic pilot) – and not personal leadership – is required to ensure that those in possession of portions of the information, power and resources work collaboratively to steer the organization in directions promising resilience, antifragility, and progress (Paquet 2009).

The reductive twist perpetrated by the CPPF to transform complex concerns about competencies, capabilities and performance into simple concerns about personal leadership is deceitful. What is required for an organization to perform well is a mix of savoir-faire, qualifications, expertise, skills, competencies all around, certain behavioral characteristics, but also particular organizational and institutional re-arrangements to ensure a good match between the complexity of the task and the capacities of office holders, and effective stewardship (Hubbard, Paquet and Wilson 2012; Paquet 2014).

In this small-g governance world, the cosmology of leadership is quite toxic. Despite the CPPF claim upfront that the future will require flat, flexible and forward thinking, the skills set that emerges from this psychoanalysis of emerging and established leaders is, not surprisingly, skills demanded in a hierarchical world, and purported to generate top-down decisions to be taken – for it is assumed that someone is in charge, that this someone has all the information, resources and power to effect a satisfactory strategy, and that the only problem is that this someone should be able to issue the right orders. There would appear to be no need for the leader to learn to begin with and to redesign anything. The cognitive abilities of the office holder are assumed to match the complexity of the tasks to be tackled. All that matters is to select the polymath charismatic leader – the rest (performance included) will follow automatically. The CPPF has squeezed out of a coterie of emergent and established leaders a list of the 29 generic skills and attributes to look for in these leaders (p.8)³. Happy hunting!

Canada 2020

An even more recent document, penned by Ralph Heintzman for Canada 2020, shifts the debate to an even more ethereal level: according to that document, the core issue that cripples the present state of affairs in the Canadian senior public service is the relationship between elected and non-elected officials. The problem is therefore not one of competencies (nor even one of individual leadership skills) but lies with the “promiscuity” between public service executives and elected officials as the source of evil⁴.

² The CPPF follows here the lead of the professional Canadian public service which has had a fixation on key leadership skills and not on competencies over the last decades: the CPPF “emerging and established leaders” have simply relayed the perspective in good currency in the Canadian bureaucracy. The underlying model of governing is still Big-G Government: a view built on the perception that all the required power, resources and information are in the hands of leaders who (if effective leaders) are able to control the process of communication through which their orders will be carried out, and thereby guide the organization to success.

³ SKILLS: business acumen, change management, collaborative intelligence, cultural competency, entrepreneurial thinking, global awareness, organizational skills, political acuity, problem solving, relationship building, strategic analysis, technological fluency; ATTRIBUTES: adaptability, broad knowledge, confidence, creativity, curiosity, decisiveness, dedication, emotional intelligence, foresight, good judgment, initiative, integrity, passion, perseverance, persuasiveness, pragmatism, receptivity, tact.

⁴ The word promiscuity is borrowed somewhat uncritically by Heintzman but has been used in a most cavalier way by many public administration specialists from Britain (Wilson and Barker 2003) and Canada (Lindquist and Rasmussen 2012). It would appear to be a pillar of Heintzman’s diagnosis.
Heintzman chooses to illustrate the toxic dimension of such promiscuity by reference to two specific events: the first one is a clearly condemnable intervention of the office of the Clerk of Privy Council to prevent an ADM from stopping wrongdoing by senior federal public servants at the time of the sponsorship affair—this was obviously reprehensible since it purported to stop action against criminal activities of a political nature\(^5\); the second one is the much more debatable case of the Clerk of Privy Council taking a stand against the Parliamentary Budget Officer (and in favor of the Government) in a matter where the PBO had made what was regarded by many observers as a very contestable request for the tabling of documents on emerging policies that had not been finalized. In discussing this second case, Heintzman would appear to suggest that any collaboration between the senior bureaucracy and the politicians is potentially \textit{a priori} reprehensible or at least suspect. By extension, one may infer that the senior bureaucracy has a responsibility to defend a notion of the public interest that is different from the one held by the elected officials, and that this technocratic view is seemingly more legitimate than the elected officials' view.

This doctrine may even appear to legitimize the disloyalty of the bureaucratic tribe of senior executives vis-à-vis the elected government, and to suggest that, for the technocrat, loyalty to the bureaucratic tribe would appear to take precedence over the loyalty to the elected government.

As a grand solution, Heintzman suggests that what is required is a Charter of Public Service that would establish the boundaries of separate facilities that politicians have to respect in dealing with the bureaucracy, and vice versa. Another way of interpreting such a document might be to regard it as a strengthening of the role of the technocracy, and a suggestion that it has a greater moral authority than the elected officials. In effect, the Canada 2020 position is ascribing the difficulties of the public service to its being unduly influenced by the politicians, and its response to the malaise is therefore to ensure a stronger firewall between them, and a more firmly established role for the technocracy in our governance.

\textit{Elegant but not helpful to navigation}

Elegant though these explorations may be, they do not address the central issue of the underperformance of the federal senior executives in the face of a world of greater complexity and uncertainty. They provide sermons when what is needed is a more down-to-earth effort to make public sector bureaucracies more effective and efficient.

The literature on governance has shown over the last decades that, in our world plagued by complexity and uncertainty, public sector bureaucracies are confronted with new difficulties:

- the problem definition for many of the issues they face is not given to them \textit{necessarily ab ovo};
- the requisite power, resources and information necessary to understand these issues and to imagine effective ways to deal with them are not in the hands of one person most of the time;
- the result is that one has to launch an inquiring system to ascertain the nature of the problem and to uncover what sort of communication and collaborative arrangements are likely to be required to cope with the problems at hand;
- this, in turn, will lead to major design work to ensure that the necessary apparatus is in place to steward the system in a reasonably effective direction (Paquet 2013).

None of the required crucial cognitive, inquiring, social learning and designing abilities or capacities would appear to have been given much prominence in the kinds of ratiocinations that the CPPF and

\(^5\) This is a matter on which we have commented in Hubbard and Paquet (2007: 48).
Canada 2020 propose. As a result, one has to wonder about the magical process through which such wonderful heroic individual bureaucratic leaders (free from any political pressure) will ever find their way in a world where an inquiring system has to be constructed to elicit a reasoned diagnosis, and to design collaborative governing – if one cannot count on a broad competent cadre of senior executives well-suited to the complexities of the tasks to play their part in all those operations.

The proposals, interesting as they may be, are therefore unlikely to do much to repair the competency deficiencies that have been observed – like the early maps of the 15th century, they may be are elegant but not helpful to navigation.

What is required to deal with the current challenges facing senior public sector executives is an exploration of the problems at a less ethereal level – at the level of competencies.

**A more useful approach**

We have been persuaded by our own ethnographic work that a good many Canadian senior public sector executives under-perform, and that they are not well equipped to deal with the full range of problems they are confronted with today and are likely to face in the future. Our way to respond to such concerns has not been to create an ideal-type of the senior-executive as leaders, nor to speculate on what tablets might be drafted to specify their relationships with politicians clearly.

We have been satisfied to put forward (Hubbard & Paquet 2014:118) a list of the sort of concerns revealed by our ethnographic findings, and to conjecture, on that basis, a tableau of the sort of competencies that would appear to be wanting. The list of the missing competencies is referred to somewhat skimply at the bottom of this page\(^6\), and was used to develop a tableau of the capacities refurbishment that might fill the gaps observed (p. 127). These gaps in the knowledge, norms and mechanisms at the cognitive, behavioral, organizational and institutional levels are summarized in table 2 below.

These are neither the only sources of current concern about the senior federal executives, nor the only competencies that may be lacking. Table 2 should be regarded as nothing but a provisional effort at ascertaining the nature of the knowledge, norms and mechanisms that are missing, and of the traits, attitudes and abilities that the public service executives would appear to need to be developed in order for the senior executives to be able to dispatch their responsibilities effectively – in well-defined contexts.

The rest of this section sketches an outline of the competencies problematique, explores why and how (even though competencies have been talked about much over the last two decades) *de facto*, the competency problematique has been effectively shunned in all but limited segments of the federal public service, and reports on an exception to this trend in the case of the Canada Revenue Agency.

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\(^6\) Decline in open critical thinking, lack of gumption, willful blindness in the face of mental prisons, failure to take initiative, impatience with contextual issues, cognitive dissonance, latent fear, moral vacancy, crippling epistemologies, risk aversion and fear of experimentation, failure to understand systems, reluctance to admit that experts must learn, disinterest in the face of new perspectives that are difficult to understand.
Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CAPACITIES</th>
<th>GAPS</th>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Norms</th>
<th>Mechanisms</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>GAPS</td>
<td>systems thinking</td>
<td>thinking critically</td>
<td>question assumptions</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>exploration</td>
<td>ecological rationality</td>
<td>view from a crane</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>delta knowledge</td>
<td>post-positivist</td>
<td>rethink education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral</td>
<td>effort to understand</td>
<td>learning as main goal</td>
<td></td>
<td>experimentation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>lateral thinking</td>
<td>calling a spade a spade</td>
<td></td>
<td>design thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>exposing deceit</td>
<td>affectio societatis</td>
<td></td>
<td>code of honour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational</td>
<td>identify mental prisons</td>
<td>moral contracts</td>
<td></td>
<td>agoras for dialogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>expose the idol of the tribe</td>
<td>seeking antifragility</td>
<td></td>
<td>forbidding fear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional</td>
<td>context</td>
<td>performance</td>
<td></td>
<td>fail-safe</td>
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<td>quality control</td>
<td></td>
<td>safe-fail</td>
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The competencies problematique

The concern with competencies emerges from a central interest in matching the capabilities of officials with the complexity (cognitive and otherwise) of the tasks with which they are likely to be confronted. This requires an accurate appreciation of the complexity of the specific tasks to be handled, and a very effective way to gauge the capabilities of humans supposedly charged with these responsibilities. Why? Because the fuzzier the appreciation of the complexity of the task and of the competencies required, and the ‘fudgier’ the appreciation of the capabilities of the candidate, the more inadequate the decision about selecting a person for the job is likely to be.

These are rather daunting requirements, and may explain why, even though it would appear to be an obvious way to tackle the selection of fully competent human resources, using a valid and reliable competency-based approach tailored to union-driven departments and agencies has proved rather unpopular in the public sector. The difficulties of the task have been a rationale not to proceed along this avenue, and to be satisfied, instead, with the quite deficient arsenal of instruments that are currently in use to select executives (Cooper et al 1998).

There is no denying that the task of gauging the complexity of the task, the capabilities needed, and to ascertain that candidates have such capabilities at a level where mission-driven performance matters, is daunting. However a large number of private and public concerns have found it a tractable task (Vazirani 2010; Bozkurt 2011). Our purpose in this paper is not to review the extensive literature on these experiences, but only to provide a broad analytical framework to help the reader gain an appreciation of what is involved.

A simple analytical framework trying to match the cognitive complexity of tasks and the human capabilities (while taking into account other relevant dimensions) has been developed by Elliott Jaques and consorts over the years (Jaques 1989, 2002; Jaques and Cason 1994). Our purpose here is neither to develop a full exposé of this particular sort of work, nor to adopt holus bolus the clinical apparatus Jaques and consorts have built upon it. We only wish to make use of Jaques vocabulary to sketch a broad and loose framework to help the reader sort out the important dimensions of this problematique, and gauge the general direction in which the selection process for executives might usefully be re-oriented.

The Jaques-type scheme is based on serious efforts to identify strata of cognitive complexity in the nature of the work, on some appreciation of the time horizon involved for those performing such work, on some way to gauge the sort of information processing capabilities underpinning the different levels of human potential capacity, and the way in which this capacity may mature over time.

If one had such reference points, one might be better equipped to design a human resources regime capable not only of ensuring a better matching of human capabilities and work requirements, but also of having some grip on ways to conjecture the likely future path of individual capabilities (given what one knows about the person now), and consequently to ensure the selection of a cadre of senior executives persons likely to perform better.

To repeat, our intent here is neither to produce an encapsulated operational version of the Jaques approach nor to adopt it as a model, but only to use it to highlight what a competency-centered approach would look like and what it might promise.

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7 For a full understanding of the differences between an analytical framework with its looseness, a theory with its generality, and a model with its specificity, see (Leibenstein 1976: 17ff)
Contours

The first component of the competencies problematique is the development of some appreciation of the degree of complexity of the task. This appreciation leads to identifying various strata or levels of complexity entailing a shorter or longer time horizon (from hours or day to decades) to dispatch the work well. Six levels are used by Jaques, and are listed for illustration purpose:

VI activities requiring complex conceptual abstract information  
V activities requiring abstract approaches using conceptual-abstract data  
IV activities requiring parallel approaches (coordinating a number of serial processes)  
III activities requiring a serial approach (working out alternative plans and choosing the best one)  
II activities requiring a cumulative diagnostic-and-then-corrective approach  
I activities requiring concretely specified output.

The second component is an appreciation of the information or mental processing capabilities of humans. In the case of Jaques, he suggests that one can readily classify such capabilities in four readily observable categories:

D capacity for parallel processing of information  
C capacity for serial processing  
B capacity for cumulative diagnostic processing  
A capacity for declarative processing

These information processing capabilities may obviously be applied to problems of growing complexity dealing with:

ε: general principles  
δ: categories of categories  
γ: categories of intangible entities  
β: intangible entities of collection of tangible entities  
α: here-and-now tangible entities.

The third component is the recognition that the applicable capabilities of humans depend on many things and not only on current potential capabilities as measured by the sophistication of the mental information processing a person uses. In the language of Jaques,

\[ AC = f \ CPC \bullet K/S \bullet C \bullet RB \]

where  
\( AC \) = applicable capability  
\( CPC \) = current potential capability measured by the sophistication of mental processing  
\( K/S \) = skilled knowledge for the particular problem  
\( C \) = commitment for the particular problem area  
\( RB \) = ability or disability to carry out behaviors required by society.

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8 Whether or not these capabilities can be readily observable or not, no one denies that these capabilities can be gauged, and that they make a difference in the performance of differentially complex tasks.
The fourth component is the maturation process of potential cognitive capability as the individual ages. This is the result of an extrapolation based on extensive observations by Jaques and consorts, and it has led to the inference that, as an individual grows in age, his/her potential capability increases, and therefore his/her capabilities to tackle more complex issues increase also.

**Promises**

This highly-stylized presentation is not meant to capture all aspects of the competencies paradigm, but it indicates that, for many specialists and experts, it is silly to rely exclusively on simplistic information like I.Q. measurements or generic academic degrees or casual impressions at stylized interviews – for those are often quite poor predictors – to determine if an individual is suitable for a complex job of a particular sort. Obviously much depends on how fine-grained the appreciation of the complexity of the work is, and on how reliable an assessment of the competencies of the candidate is available. While these matters are very much under discussion, nobody has declared that success in gauging these features is impossible to achieve. In any case, it would appear that this sort of framework would provide a more useful approach than the reliance on generic ethereal leadership qualities or the like.

Moreover, the more precise one is able to be about the complexities of the task and the competencies of the candidates, the more likely it is that one can design training programs to help fill any gaps in the competencies of the candidates (if they were to become evident) or to initiate some organization redesign to alleviate some particularly thorny features of the requirements of the tasks – so as to ensure that the goodness of fit may be improved between the organization and the assortment of people it has with whom to work.

Whatever the difficulty in achieving good marksmanship using a valid and reliable competencies approach, it would appear unconscionable not to exert some efforts in this direction since the alternatives that would appear to be envisaged by emerging and established leaders or by resident philosophers of public administration would not seem to be necessarily very promising.

(2) Competency as a perplexing label

The notion of competency is undoubtedly very complex. It is based on a mix of qualifications and capabilities for complex work, skills pertaining to specialized areas, commitment, and behavioral requirements to do work of quality in the face of tasks of various complexities – in a world where quality is a somewhat imprecise word connoting a degree of expertise, *savoir-faire, savoir-être*, and a professional commitment to meet high standards. In that sense, the notion of competency is quite different from the notions of *savoirs* or knowledge which are only some necessary components of capabilities but most certainly not sufficient components to ensure competency to deliver the sort of high quality services senior federal executives are meant to provide.

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<sup>9</sup> It might be worth noting that efforts in this direction were attempted in the mid 1990s. At the time Paquet was involved with the Canadian Centre on Management Development, and had persuaded the Principal, Ole Insgtrup, that it might be worth exploring what competencies of the federal government executives cadre might be relatively weaker and be improved by aligning courses offered by CCMD to correct competency deficiencies observed in the group. Len Slivinski of the PSC had the data on the very many competencies measured by the PSC for thousands of EXs over time. It would have been easy to ascertain on which ones of these competencies (deemed necessary at the time) that cadre of EXS would appear to be relatively less well prepared. The data, in aggregate form, would have preserved the privacy of individuals but would have revealed the relative competency weaknesses of the EXs as a whole, and would have guided CCMD in helping to repair them. Unfortunately, the senior authority at the PSC refused to release this information. This defensiveness prevented an early mobilization of CCMD to provide remedial training.
As we have seen above, there is a propensity for public administration commentators in their disquisitions about competencies to allow themselves to escape the difficulties in gauging the intricacies of the work and the capabilities of the candidates concretely, by jumping into evasive thinking and loose general correlations between very general characteristics. This is the result of an illusion of totality about the work in the public sector: it is seemingly regarded (quite wrongly) as work of a different sort altogether that cannot be performed by ordinary private sector individuals, but must be reserved for a sort of missionary quality workers. Instead of trying to tackle the difficult task of delineating the precise dimensions of the job, public administration specialists are satisfied to look for across the board qualities that are purported to grant true missionary competencies (whatever these may be) for all the work in the whole federal government that is regarded as an homogeneous lump of labour (Kernaghan 2007; Hubbard & Paquet 2010).

In fact, competencies are not that generic. One would not necessarily trust one’s dentist to defend one in a court of law. So this pressure to simplify and generalize unduly, simply for convenience purposes, has tended to smother to a considerable extent the necessity to be fine-grained in dealing with competencies. The propensity by the bureaucratic tribe to centralize and to promote homogeneity of processes – also vociferously promoted by unions – has run forcefully against the requirements for competencies in terms of detailed underlying capabilities to deal with various forms of complexities of tasks across the federal public service.

(3) The peculiar capacity for surrealism of the Canadian federal bureaucracy

Much serious work on competencies has been done at the Public Service Commission of Canada over the years since the 1970s (Slivinski and Miles 1996). In fact, in the early 1990s, every person was subjected to a battery of tests upon being considered for admission into the EX category. Part of that exercise established their score on 14 competencies. These results were obviously used in arriving at decisions about entry in the executive category. But such practice was not uniformly regarded positively. Even from within the PSC, there was caution verging on unease about engaging in such evaluation for purposes of appointments or selection because of the difficulty in generating very reliable gauges for both the complexity of the task and the capabilities of individuals (Cooper et al 1998).

Yet concerns about performance had been omnipresent since the 1980s, and there was a strong appetite for ways to improve the general performance of the public service (e.g., the Public Service 2000 exercise that resulted in a White Paper in 1990 and legislative changes in 1992). Moreover, one might have expected that the financial stringency period of the mid-1990s would provide an added impetus to overhaul the ways in which the senior executives were selected, and to develop the competency approach further as a promising road. Indeed, on the surface, this has happened, but with surprising results in the reality of the trenches.

The modern version of the independent Public Service Commission (PSC) was established to protect the public service from undue political patronage. By the late 1950s, it had become a full service personnel agency. The Treasury Board Secretariat (as the formal bureaucratic support for the employer) had serious reasons to seek involvement in the file, and had increasingly done so since the 1960s. Decades later the Privy Council Office joined in (the Clerk having been made the titular head of the public service). With all those central agencies having a finger in the pie – often operating with different legitimate perspectives and different objectives – the pressure to rationalize led the charge toward the development of some frameworks that would enable the centre to gain a sense of control over a growing and ever more disparate mass of public sector employees over time.

The public household was already quite pluralistic – engaged in quite disparate activities and pursuing more or less complementary goals – and this could only be regarded as a nuisance by those at the centre
who were dreaming of unifying this fragmented enterprise, and of re-establishing a sense of control over it to ensure economy, efficiency, and effectiveness. This \textit{état d’esprit} might be quite helpful as long as it remains simply a concern for as much harmonization as possible. But, when it becomes a utopian drive generating surreal centralized frameworks, \textit{as it has done}, the damage may be considerable.

The situation has been described vividly by Clark and Swain in 2005. They denounced the array of utopian centralized and homogeneity-generating reforms that have come (so they say) to prevent the different departments and agencies from delivering the services they were designed to produce. Over time, there have come to emerge macro-plans for government performance (Management Accountability Framework) to not just enable macro-level oversight, but to exercise control. Moreover there was pressure to hook up all the other systems to it. This impacted on the structure of the human resources scheme (e.g., key leadership competencies) that, in turn, needed to fit. This led to pressure on the different regimes to eliminate idiosyncrasies, and to agree on broad general categories of macro-competencies that had to be vested with a coefficient of vagueness so as to fit all situations.

As a matter of consequence, this very vagueness and malleability made competencies so mushy that one could run a three-ton truck through them, while claiming to be in keeping with the spirit of the broad norms. For instance, as a result of this smothering process, the 14 competencies in use were found to be too complex, and reduced to 4. This led to more and more talk about competencies but defined in more and more ethereal and vague ways. So, concretely, in daily life, real concern about real competency as a driving force in the selection of personnel has become ever more attenuated.

The result has been a somewhat schizophrenic outflow of statements from the Canadian government about what was going on on the competency front.

On the one hand, much has been written in the form of fable-like and inspirational stories (originating from the central agencies and mainly for international audiences) that has celebrated the great success of these operations, and has argued that MAF has led not only to the elicitation of a list of key leadership competencies that drives directly the choice of executive in the public service, but also to the design of the programs of the Canadian School of Public Service – that is meant to provide continuing education for the Canadian federal public sector executives (Forgues-Savage and Wong 2010).

On the other hand, much serious concern has been expressed within the Canadian federal service, in the world of \textit{everyday makers} (as Henrik Bang (2003) calls them), about the inadequacy of the performance of government units as a result of their not being able to do what they should for lack of personnel able and allowed to do it. This is the clear message we have received from the Canadian federal executives we conversed with, and is echoed in a whole literature on the poor performance of the public service (e.g., poor alignment of HR plans with business plans, ineffective dealing with poor performers, etc.).

Any one even cursorily informed about the Canadian federal public service, and the functioning of MAF, human resource management, and the realities of the Canada School of Public Service would be embarrassed by the fairy tales propounded internationally by official Canadian emissaries to international fora. The reality is much closer to the Clark-Swain scenario than to the idyllic state of affair evoked by federal officials from central agencies.

Demonstrating it, however, is not so easy because of the fact that the federal tribe of senior executives has no interest in denouncing either its own inadequacies openly or the inadequacies of the process that got them to the positions they are in today. One may however gauge that the existing system must be somewhat inadequate since it has been openly rejected by a significant segment of the Canadian public service itself as unsatisfactory, and replaced by an alternative HR regime deliberately focused on competencies.
An enlightening way to use a competency approach: the CRA case

The Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) assesses, collects, and administers hundreds of billions of dollars in tax revenue every year, and directly delivers billions in benefits and tax credits. In 2012-13, it had the equivalent of about 40,000 people full time, and a budget of over 4.25$ billion – about 70% of its operating budget going for the salaries and benefits of its workforce.

It was given the authority to design and develop its own tailor-made framework and systems to manage human resources. Its direct responsibilities were extended to staffing, classification, compensation, labour relations, collective bargaining, training, and human resources policy development, to help make the its HRM regime more efficient, effective, and responsive to its business needs. It chose to build an HR regime that enables the alignment of HR plans and business plans, and focused on ‘competencies’ as the common denominator to enable the building and sustaining of an integrated HR regime that explicitly links workforce needs and business needs (CRA 2011).

Built on the idea that organizational performance results from having the right people, with the right skills, in the right place, at the right time, competency profiles were prepared for relevant positions and approved by the Board of Management that provides management oversight (CRA 2012a). These competencies have been used as the foundation for all HR functions: resourcing and recruitment; classification; training and learning; career management; performance management; and HR planning.

The CRA competencies are much more fine-grained than the central four key leadership competencies (KLC) profile (value and ethics, strategic thinking, engagement, management excellence). The competencies definitions are focused on business requirements, and they are used to ensure consistency across the agency (CRA 2012b). Moreover, they are constantly revised as the context changes. The most-recently updated list comprises 17 behavioural competencies and 34 technical competencies. It includes definitions for each one along with the core motivation sought. There is a progression scale (i.e. four levels for behavioural competencies - reactive through to strategic - and five for technical ones - basic knowledge through to expert).

Systematic agency level feedback is reviewed (related to several categories of expectations about the Agency’s overall management capacity), areas requiring further work are identified, and next steps that should be taken (CRA 2013-14: 3). Those next steps inform the corporate business plan, the objectives of the performance agreement of CRA’s uppermost bureaucrat (the Commissioner) as well as other work plans. For each category, expectations for good management, key questions that delineate good management practices are identified and provide the basis for the assessment, and the evidence used to make the assessment is reported.

The success of CRA both in terms of employee satisfaction and assessed performance – however imperfect those measurements might be – have been noted by the Auditor-General under the new arrangements that have freed CRA to focus on performance (Auditor General of Canada 2008).

Taking competencies seriously

Our argument up to now has established a few important points:

- first, that there is a presumption that a competency-based approach would generate better organizational performance than an act of faith in leadership, the distillation of vague moral contracts, or the use of haphazard stylized interviews, if such a thing could be delivered;
• second, that this is likely to materialize only if the complexities of the tasks and the capabilities of the human resources are appraised well;
• third, that it cannot happen unless one is able to operate at the meso-level (i.e., at a level that enables one to appreciate the mission of the organization in a rather precise way);
• fourth, that the CRA experiment has shown that this can be accomplished.

This raises serious questions about the prevalent illusion of totality, the propensity to focus on analysis at the very aggregative level, and the satisfaction with very generic ways to deal with competencies – as if they were effective ways to appreciate the complexities of the tasks and the capabilities of individuals. A requisite degree of dis-aggregation and de-homogenization of the process is necessary for the competency-based approach to be able to build on the mission of the organization and not only on generalities about the work of organizations in general.

To ensure that a competency-based approach is adopted, three major challenges have to be overcome.

First, in order to have a locus where the mission of the organization is taken seriously, and where it is going to be made to fit with the environment it is meant to serve, one must envisage the possibility of generalizing what has worked so well with CRA – an agency confronted with a wide variety of stakeholders – i.e., the setting up of external boards of management for departments and agencies.

Without such a structure at the interfaces between the broad social context and the whole-of-government conglomerate – the equivalent of a subsidiary board of the whole-of-government management board that would take charge of management and performance in a specific area – there is little chance that performance will ever find any true anchor at all and ever be taken seriously.

The broad objectives of the political conglomerate will never be translated well in operational and managerial terms by bureaucrats whose sole purpose in life is to serve the broad conglomerate that has much broader considerations in mind.

Peter Aucoin (2007) has argued that the board of management experiment that has been successful with CRA should be extended to other departments and agencies, because there is a “vacuum of governance for the management function in government”. The point has been re-iterated forcefully by Heintzman and Juillet (2012) who underline the fact that “if departments and agencies have their own local governance instruments that are able to apply the same standards (e.g. MAF) in a more direct ways and on a more regular basis… Boards of management could help to “drive out the fake” in public management and help make something like MAF a genuine management framework for senior leaders – that is, a framework they actually use in their own pursuit of improvement in organizational performance, not just something with which they comply for purposes of reporting to central agencies” (367).

This sort of structure would not in any way weaken the accountability chain since the chair of the board of management could appear in front of parliamentary committees upstream, but such a Board would also have (as it has in the case of CRA) sub-committees dealing with key management functions downstream – like the human resources function. This would ensure the possibility of dealing in situ with the key competency challenge: connecting the complexity of the tasks directly with the process responsible for staffing the positions of those attending to these tasks.

Second, in order for departments with boards of management to be able to define competencies in terms that fit the complexities of their particular mission, there will have to be arduous negotiations with the unions that have taken hold of job categories, and have little interest in allowing competencies to be established (even though they are essential for the good performance of the organization) if, for example, they in any way attenuate the lateral inter-departmental movements of personnel. This will also be
opposed at the top by executives hoping to hop their way up the executive echelons by zigzag-ing their way inter-departmentally, and have little interest in departmental or agency performance.

This was accomplished at CRA, and, with time, it has contributed to maintain the continuity and management focus that have obviously contributed to the CRA’s success. This would tend to question the wisdom of the merry-go-round of senior executives among departments and agencies without concern for their specific capacities to deal with the different circumstances they provide equally well – a bad protocol developed in the Trudeau era. However, it would be naïve to presume that it will be easy. Performance is a most detested word in union circles. And the long tradition of the Government of Canada wanting to be a model employer has generated a long list of concessions to the public sector unions over time that have translated into a greater and greater schism between the HR regime and performance concerns. The shift to a competency-approach would entail a focus on performance as a priority that will call for nothing less than a *cultural revolution*.

The full measure of the antagonism of the unions to performance becoming more important may be gauged by the over-the-top reaction of 17 federal public sector unions to the statement by the President of Treasury Board of the Government of Canada, Tony Clement, that the performance of public servants should be assessed on the basis of “showing integrity and respect, thinking things through, working effectively with others, taking initiative and being action-oriented”. However innocuous these may appear to mere mortals, the 17 unions have opposed them, and are taking the government to court for “disguised discipline” (May 2014).

One may therefore expect the fight to re-institute performance concern by taking a competency-approach to generate a substantial rear-guard action, but this should not be an alibi for not trying.

Third, above and beyond the creation of boards of management and negotiating the reshaping of the interface with the unions in departments, there will have to be a necessary reframing of the mindset of seniors executives in the federal Canadian public service to make this transformation possible. Indeed, this is probably the major challenge.

The group that benefits most from the present “grey zone” where anything goes and maladministration thrives is the group of senior executives and uppermost bureaucrats. While the current confusion may damage good governance and public trust (Heintzman and Juillet 2012:369), it serves the ‘tribe’ well, and immunizes it from meaningful performance evaluation and assessment. The idea that senior executives and uppermost bureaucrats as a group would not be able to hide any longer behind fuzz and might be forced to meet competencies tests and performance tests can only be arresting.

While we may not have the same faith in clarity as a panacea as Heintzman and Juillet, a case can be made that we have a long distance to go in Canada at the federal level before clarity runs into diminishing returns. In the meantime, the defense of the status quo would appear to be obscurantist, and the defense of the current amateurish selection of personnel is nothing less than active support for maladministration and malgovernance of management.

Consequently, it may not be possible to adopt a competency-approach without challenging frontally the non-unionized senior executive class and its current clergy-like frame of mind. This terrain is more of a minefield than the one defended by the unions. The reason is that while the politicians have a strong interest in performance, the tribe does not: it is much more concerned (as the public choice literature has shown) in preserving its privileges and authority than in performance. However, for reasons that are not entirely understandable for many, the senior executives and super-bureaucrats (Paquet 2014b) have acquired a credibility and legitimacy with the citizenry (as irony would have it because of their purported expertise and competencies) that have made too often their positions regarded as more defensible than
those of elected officials. As a result, it can only be expected that the tribe will see a competency-and performance approach as quite threatening, and oppose it in Canada the way the technocracy opposed it in Australia. Indeed, the Australian government, that had experimented with boards of management, decided to back off and to revert back to direct ministerial control.

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Whether or not these obstacles can be overcome in Canada is an open question, but what is clear is that up to now there has been a conspiracy of forces at work preventing the use of the competency approach to penetrate the Canadian federal public service, and that this conspiracy of blockers has succeeded only because they have been able to marginalize concerns about effective performance as a guiding beacon in public administration in Canada. The model employer philosophy of the Canadian federal government has focused much more on catering to the legitimate and illegitimate requests of the employees than on extracting value adding from them. At the lower echelons of the public service, this has translated into higher costs and poor service to the population. At the higher echelons, this has meant malgovernance, poor management, and the evolution toward a situation where a good many of the federal senior executives are not well suited to the full range of activities in their job.

There has been much reluctance to fully recognize these realities, because admitting it could only trigger the recognition that the whole human resources regime has to be overhauled, that senior executives cannot remain only a whimsically tested and controlled group any longer, and that a significant portion of that group may have to be re-assigned or replaced. So cognitive dissonance has kicked in ferociously.

A confederacy of academics and public administrators from within the Canadian federal public service have explicitly opposed a competency approach: some on the grounds that it might not generate accurate and reliable enough appreciations of the complexities of the task and of the capabilities of the bureaucrats; others, like unions, as a matter of principle as they have objected to performance measurements; while for many senior executives and super-bureaucrats, such tests would be regarded as nothing less than a crime of *lèse-majesté*. All have held these views as a strategy to preserve a status quo that has served Canadians rather badly.

Every decade or so, over the last 30 years, one Quixote or another has raised the question of the performance of the public service, and the confederacy of deniers has succeeded in drowning his voice. This counter-attack has been based entirely on the assumptions that work in the public sector was incommensurable with work in other sectors, that it was imbied by intangible benefits to society that could not be easily gauged, and that such work was more in the nature of a response to a calling than anything one might observe elsewhere. Over the last decades, this ideology has not been challenged even though we have found no one capable of demonstrating that this is the case. It has become an act of faith in public sector land.

More recently, however, the cosmology on which such an act of faith is built has begun to crumble. Very few citizens now would subscribe to such a credo. Indeed, the lower echelons of the public service have realized it first, and have shifted their defense from sermons on the particularity of their work deserving special treatment, to tactics that used to be the preserve of longshoremen. The senior executives are also beginning to sense that this line of defense is no longer effective, and they are tempted to use the same methods as their union brethren to preserve the status quo. Soon this will only leave the academics to defend the sanctity of the tribe of public sector employees – in the same manner as they keep trying to rationalize their own privileges and the right for their work to remain unscrutinized and their performance not seriously appraised in the academy.
Conclusion

For those who remain untouched by the force of these pseudo-ecclesiastical arguments, the time has come to propose an alternative to the arrangements that would appear to have served the citizenry so badly – keeping in mind that a certain political courage to tackle these issues would appear to materialize. This would entail a variety of changes in federal public sector management:

- the promotion of performance to a prime role in public management
- the creation of effective boards of management for departments and agencies
- the delegation to these boards of strong performance mandates including the need to match capabilities to the complexities of the tasks, and to vigilantly monitor how this matching needs to change when circumstances change
- the development of ever more expertise in appraising quantitatively and qualitatively the complexity of tasks and the capabilities of individuals and groups to deal with them
- the development of direct connections between the boards of management and the whole-of-government board to ensure that their work cohere
- the development of direct connections between the local boards of management and the Canada School of Public Service so that the School can respond to their needs – otherwise each department or group of cognate departments should be authorized (under the authority of the local board) to develop local arrangements for training
- the streamlining of the process and focus of the selection process for personnel to be enriched significantly to deal fully and thoroughly with cognitive capabilities, behavioral characteristics, gumption, etc., and to avoid falling prey to ‘progressive’ techniques like the anonymous CV syndrome – adopted in many European countries (see CV anonyme in Wikipedia) – that are bound to defang, neuter and sanitize selection processes at the very time when they are in need of strong re-enforcement.

These are only general indications of the direction in which the new management and HR regimes should evolve. This is not the place to flesh out the full complement of features of the new arrangements. It will have to await a next instalment. But it should be clear that these new arrangements would fill the governance vacuum that Peter Aucoin pointed to – a governance vacuum that cannot be filled unless boards of management are created for departments and agencies, and a competency approach is adopted to match the capacities of candidates to the complexities of the tasks. It is that simple!

References

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