



## CHANGE MANAGEMENT

# Public Managers and Politically Driven Change: A Retrospective

by Paul Eder and Blaine R. Young

After every election, public managers find themselves working for new elected officials. This change can bring tension and requires thoughtful solutions. A unifying change vision can help government organizations achieve results despite electoral and economic upheaval.

**All public managers must prepare** for the specter of change that accompanies elections, and for the new public supervision they can expect to receive from elected and appointed officials. On top of this uncertainty, the past few years have brought other kinds of uncertainty and distress as well, as the nation's economy sank, and federal, state, and local government organizations braced for dramatic economic impacts. Flexibility and adaptability were required from leaders at all levels of government.

Uncertainty, fear, and worry fuel the nightmares of public managers. Is there a change paradigm that can help public managers navigate this uncertainty?

The results we achieved in Frederick County, Maryland, the past few years are one answer to this question. While the results achieved in Frederick County involve local government, they can apply to interactions among public managers and political officials at all levels of government. The results also highlight the capability and quality of public servants in Frederick County, and show that despite cultural changes, negative economic forces, and a nation in doubt, devoted servants and political officials can work together to achieve significant outcomes.

## The Politics of Change

Public managers regularly must switch gears when a new elected or politically appointed official rises to the helm of their organization. Political upheaval also sometimes drives changes, as do budget considerations and general business requirements.

We suggest that the goal for political officials and public managers should be to establish a “unifying change vision,” representing the intersection of politically driven change, necessity-driven change, and change that makes good business sense (see figure).

This depiction of change is consistent with the “common in-group identity model” (CIIM) perspective developed by psychologist Samuel Gaertner and his colleague John Dovidio. The CIIM is often used to describe instances of intergroup bias, when two parties enter a situation with inherently different perspectives based on their group membership.

According to the CIIM, two groups that perceive each other as out-groups can eliminate obstacles and bias by adopting a common identity. In the context of government management, political officials and public managers with separate goals can be united under the banner of a unifying change vision.

In Frederick County, Blaine Young, a co-author of this article, served as president of the Board of County Commissioners for nearly four years. He encountered a situation ripe for developing and implementing this kind of vision. He and his fellow commissioners had won their elected positions with a campaign message of fiscal responsibility. This message was supported by the need to eliminate a \$48 million deficit. As it turned out, eliminating several inefficiencies and process deficiencies in county departments made good business sense as well.

With his politically promised change supported by the situational context, he and the other commissioners on the board set out to systematically ensure the management culture of the county government supported the unifying change vision.

## Leadership Team Development Through Empowerment

Young approached his directors as a team with the unifying change vision of “doing more with less.” He noted a need to change the mindset of the leadership team to get them aligned with the vision.

It is important that public managers view themselves and their goals in the context of the greater team rather

than as individualized silos. In a 2014 article in the *Journal of Management*, Robert Ployhart and his colleagues present a framework that emphasizes the importance of contextual environments for tapping into the social interaction-based aspects of human capital resources. In sum, resources in a group have an added, interactional value over and above individual resources’ potential contributions.

To address the change, Young established quarterly informal lunch meetings with directors. Topics of discussion regularly included how to save money in the budget and how to make the service delivery model more efficient and effective. Directors were encouraged to bring their ideas to share.

From the human capital resource perspective, Young operated under the assumption that public managers at the director level had the collective capabilities and discretion to make complex budgetary decisions. This assumption did not mesh with the culture that existed upon his arrival; directors previously had not been encouraged to make “entrepreneurial” and collaborative budgetary decisions.

Eventually the new mindset took hold. The informal lunch setting was a key contributor to the success and collaboration of the directors. Lunch participants would develop ad hoc solutions to budget issues, such as developing plans to share administrative assistants or use contractors versus employees for snow and tree removal. At one meeting, the group discussed a \$5 million budget shortfall, and within a week, participants returned to their offices and developed plans for reducing 20 percent of the projected deficit.

## Hard Business Choices Can Yield Positive Results

The most difficult aspect of efficiency-focused change is the potential for eliminating jobs and livelihoods. As with many local government organizations throughout the country, Young and his colleagues presided over a drop in county government employment. Most departments were reorganized, and staffs were trimmed down.

Managers instituted a hiring freeze that required a thorough review process before any position could be filled. A critical vacancy committee, consisting of top county managers, could determine if any open position should be refilled or addressed in another manner. By instituting these strong controls, Frederick County solidified its books and was able to improve the pay and working conditions of remaining employees.

Pension plans and trust funds achieved higher funding levels. Employees received cost of living adjustments for three years in a row when most local governments were having difficulty with these budget items. In addition, some 40 percent additional employees entered the ranks of six-figure earners.

### Dealing With a Bull in a China Shop

As an elected official with a strong fiscal agenda, Young admits that his directors at first viewed him to be the proverbial “bull in a china shop.” That reaction was partially in response to the newness of the changes being suggested. For the unifying change vision to gain buy-in, he had to establish a mutually trusting relationship with directors.

Young approached managers with the proposition that “The worst manager is the manager who makes no decision.” At first, directors would approach or call him regularly with every management issue, but he soon established an expectation of personal responsibility.

He gave managers permission to make the decisions, as long as they promptly informed the board if any unanticipated mess occurred. This permission and the general level of autonomy communicated to and expected of directors helped achieve a level of trust that was important when the board and directors had to work together on changes promised during the election.

### The One That Got Away

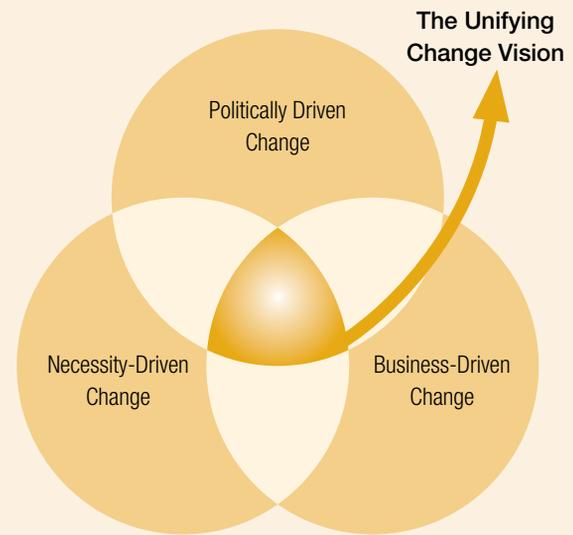
Some groups may be more difficult to welcome into the tent. Although county directors and the Board of County Commissioners came to a common understanding, the Frederick County Board of Education (BoE) was still resistant to the vision. From a common in-group identity perspective, the BoE still viewed itself as an out-group.

The matter was complicated because the members of the BoE also are elected officials, some of whom had won office with platforms emphasizing different priorities than those of the county commissioners’. The differences were difficult to reconcile, and the same vision was not unifying for all parties. Accordingly, the unifying change vision established for county managers would have to be modified before any partnership with the county commissioners could be expected.

### A Practical Way Forward

Politically driven change is a fact of life for public managers. The priorities of a new administration may be diametrically opposed to those established by an outgoing

## Developing a Unifying Change Vision



Source: The Center for Organizational Excellence Inc.

administration. Accordingly, public managers often find themselves in a Ping-Pong ball-like position. Developing a unifying change vision is not a complex concept. The general premise is the importance of finding common ground.

In Frederick County, fiscal progress over the past few years was largely achieved by rallying public managers around a vision that wasn't initially palatable. As a result, the county as a whole achieved economic success. Such success is by no means a miracle; instead it is a replicable reality, which can be applied regardless of political affiliation or the type of change being championed.

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