

Best-practice cases reconsidered from an international perspective

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to shed some light on the transfer of knowledge of international public sector reforms. Given the available stock of knowledge on public sector reforms in various countries the key issue is how organizational learning from international best-practice cases can be facilitated. The question under consideration is how to improve the methodology of best-practice research in such a way that decision-makers may make well-informed selections among best-practice case studies and know how to implement foreign best practice in their domestic political and administrative context. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The New Public Management (NPM) of the 1980s and 1990s was accompanied by the rise to ascendancy of “best-practice” case analysis. This form of story telling was the chief means by which public management innovations were evaluated and spread among OECD member countries. Best-practice case study continues to prevail even in the current post-NPM era.

The existing body of best-practice knowledge is nourished by four main sources. First of all, practitioners and consultants nourish it by promoting their own ideas and exchanging anecdotal or experiential evidence of successful innovations (see, for example, Osborne and Gaebler, 1992). This is the source of the claim that NPM is largely a practice-driven movement. Second, public sector quality and innovation awards are given out in many OECD member countries. The pool of award recipients and finalists represents a prime

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source of best-practice information. Third, the Public Management Service at OECD has been at the forefront of the new developments in public management in OECD member countries. The World Bank has played a similar role for transitional economies. Fourth, case clearinghouses, especially the John F. Kennedy School's at Harvard University, the world's largest producer and repository of case studies, have become very influential for teaching scholars and practitioners about how government works and how public policy is made and implemented (see <http://www.ksgcase.harvard.edu/>).

Best-practice cases provide a broad array of fact patterns and solutions that can be matched to any and all public management puzzles. But questions remain. Will a solution work for me? Will it travel, especially across borders? As a matter of fact, there is quite a lot of confusion in the international public management community about what constitutes best practice or what the term means.

For example, most German local government experts say Tilburg when asked to identify the best-run municipality in the Netherlands. Dutch experts usually cite other municipalities, such as Delft for example. The same is true of New Zealand. Christchurch is one of the best-run cities in the world according to the 1993 Carl Bertelsmann Prize competition (Bertelsmann Foundation, 1993: 97). New Zealanders, however, report that Dunedin is managed better than any other city in New Zealand.

This messy situation illustrates the problems with the existing mechanisms through which public management innovations are diffused throughout the world. When certain practices are declared to be in some sense "best," they automatically become candidates for international diffusion. Local reception and adoption of public management innovations then depends on opinion leaders and change agents. For example, Chinese governmental accounting has been successively influenced by Japanese practices, by American advisors, then by Soviet experts, and finally the West has again become a favorite source of ideas (Chan, Jones & Lüder, 1996: 16).

How do we know whether the heralded solutions are really the best ones? There may be other approaches that would yield better results, but we do not know about them. Moreover, we are unlikely to find out about other, better approaches if over time nationally or internationally identified best practice evolves into a recognized standard. We have seen how national accounting standards have discouraged innovation in accounting practices. In this case, potentials may not fully be exploited and what is applied in practice are suboptimal solutions.

2. The research question: what is best practice?

The purpose of this article is to discuss the concept of public management best-practice case studies from an international perspective. The main issue under consideration is how to improve the methodology of best-practice case studies in such a way that they help decision-makers to make well-informed selections among various best-practice cases. This means that this article mainly deals with the design of case studies. The objective is to contribute to the discussion in the research community on how to get a case study right.

The article starts by analyzing some of the empirical issues involved in determining best

practice. Next, an attempt is made to identify an analytical framework that allows the writer/reader to distinguish between more and less culture-bound public management practices. The article concludes with some suggestions on how to improve the research design of good-practice case studies. (Even carefully written and well selected best-practice cases may not work in particular contexts because of implementation problems. This issue is addressed in a second paper forthcoming in the *Policy Studies Journal*.)

The focus of the article will be limited to best-practice case studies in the field of public management. The reason is that the issues involved in assuring a successful transfer of knowledge in public governance transcend the difficulties of transferring best practice in management. If best-practice public management has to produce “good pianos,” “good governance” has to make sure that “good pianos won’t play bad music” (Stowe, 1992: 387 and 392). This means that governance is by definition contextual (and not just context-bound), for “good music” requires an emphatic relationship between piano players (and potentially other musicians) and the audience.

But what does best-practice public management mean? As the following considerations will show, best practice is a relative concept. The immediate implication is to change the terminology accordingly and to speak of good practice instead of best practice. But there are also more far-reaching implications for the research design of good-practice case studies: researchers have to make explicit what kind of performance evaluation, time period, institutional and cultural context case studies refer to in order to indicate to decision-makers whether a specific case study is relevant or not.

3. The relativity of the concept

3.1. The performance dimension

Given that NPM has to be understood as a public management philosophy with a strong focus on results, best-practice cases must show results. This means that good practices produce measurable, or, at least, observable improvements. This may sound trivial, however, there are many cases where change is equated with better performance. For example, there are many public organizations that do not engage in visible management reforms but nevertheless outperform organizations that are active on the reform front. In the former case, organizational structures, process and resource management may be flexible enough to adapt smoothly; whereas in the latter case, large-scale reforms were necessary to make the organization sufficiently flexible to adapt to circumstances. Of course, the first organization may have made large-scale reforms in the past. This raises the issue of timing, which is examined in the following section.

But what is best practice in relation to organizational performance? Like excellence, best practice may refer to different dimensions of results such as productivity, effectiveness, efficiency or customer satisfaction (Halachmi, 1996: 9). Best-practice performance may also refer to different organizational dimensions such as human resource management, use of information technology, budget management, and so forth. Last but not least, there are also holistic concepts of best practice. They are usually based on the balanced scorecard approach

and they are disseminated through self-assessment excellence models and quality awards. The common characteristic of all these models is that they consider public organizations as production functions with input factors on one side and results on the other side of the equation.

The identification of overall best-practice organizations is methodologically quite problematic. To compare the performance of different organizations, their resources and results must be measured with the same yardstick. But an overall evaluation also requires those resources and results to be weighed or balanced. Yet, it is obvious the same weights cannot be used in all organizations. Customer service is less important to the delivery of services like garbage collection than to services like health care, for example. Thus, an overall score may not be a valid measure of organizational performance. High-performance organizational dimension may be given greater weight than deserved in reality. Likewise, a yardstick measure may convey a false image of organizational reality if it relies on an easily measurable indicator. For instance, hospital performance measurement continues to concentrate on average waiting time even though other intangible aspects of healthcare quality such as privacy, nursing care, and food service are more important to patients (see Lo Schiavo, 2000).

As a matter of fact, evaluations of public policies have become more and more common in OECD member countries. Nevertheless, the results of (new) public management reforms are not easily evaluated. One of the reasons is the typical *ceteris paribus* problem in social science research. This means that there are too many factors influencing the dependent variable so that it is impossible to do a “cause-effect” analysis. The other more pragmatic problem is that before the introduction of NPM reforms, performance specification and measurement was rather lacking. For example, in the absence of accrual accounting it is rather difficult to make *ex-ante* and *ex-post* comparisons of efficiency increases in terms of costs.

The increase of knowledge in performance measurement and the availability of new information technologies has allowed considerable progress to be made on the assessment of results of not only routine public management activities but also of public management reforms. This methodological refinement is reflected in the fact that today an enormous variety of measurement tools are used in the public sector. This range of tools includes stakeholder analysis, focus groups, complaint analysis, process benchmarking, customer satisfaction measurement and employee opinion surveys. Even though none of these tools is conceptually new, widespread use is distinctly and profoundly new (Van Wart & Berman, 1999: 339). At the same time, more attention is paid to the level of difficulty. For example, there is more and more awareness that meaningful outcome measurement has to be done as a joint intergovernmental exercise (Löffler & Parker, 1999). Especially in countries where public tasks are implemented at lower levels of government, outcome measurement cannot be solely the responsibility of federal agencies.

But even if the results of a given public management innovation were measured in quantitative and/or qualitative terms there is still the issue of how to evaluate the results. Are the results achieved above average or are they not very noteworthy? In other words, a decision has to be made about the relevant benchmark derived from some normative or political considerations or from other empirical data. For example, there might be political

targets for savings. If these savings cannot be realized, political decision-makers may not see public management reforms as best practices, even if they would meet expectations of service recipients. In many cases, political leaders' expectations are different from the goals set by the administrative change agents, especially where time frame is concerned (see Klages & Löffler, 1997: 179f).

Promising cases of best practice can be compared to similar innovations in the public and private sector in order to find out what organization is really the best in class. It is obvious that the direct comparison of public and/or private sector organizations involves some form of competition or grading process. It depends very much on the administrative and political culture of a country to what degree any ranking obtained from such a results-oriented benchmarking can be made public.

In the case of the government performance project in the United States, fifty states and fifteen high profile federal agencies were persuaded to participate in an extensive management evaluation (see <http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/gpp/stategrade.htm>). The grade that every state or federal agency obtained in various management areas were widely published in two magazines in the field of government reporting: *Governing* (Barrett & Greene, 1999), which focuses on states and localities, and *Government Executive* (Laurent, 1999), which focuses on the federal government. By contrast, there is little public information available about local government benchmarking activities which are coordinated and supported by the German Local Government Board KGSt (for the benchmarking methodology, see <http://www.ikonetz.de/>). It seems that the political culture in the United States is more competition-oriented than is the case in Germany.

This shows that the evaluation of public management innovations in terms of results is feasible, but in some cases, also politically sensitive. This also limits the availability of evaluations for comparative research purposes. But even if hard data are available, it is important to consider the time and space the data relate to in order to avoid misinterpretation.

3.2. *The time factor*

By the same token, what is considered best changes over time. This is apparent when one looks at how public management models changed over time. Starting points differed across OECD member countries, even where the sequence of public management ideas and even fashions were nearly identical.

For example, in the United Kingdom, NPM developed during the Thatcher Government. Pollitt (1993: 52–58) considers the Financial Management Initiative in 1982 a particularly important landmark. In Germany, NPM got started at the local government level in 1991 (Klages & Löffler, 1997: 169). The conceptualization and dissemination of the so-called “new steering model” by the Local Government Board (KGSt) was very influential for local government but also for state administration. In France, NPM ideas were not implemented until the late 1990s. Since then various sectors, in particular the tax administration (see, <http://www.oecd.org/puma/mgmtres/pac/-pubs/PerfCont/France.pdf>) have introduced contract management as well as benchmarking.

Even within NPM an evolution of public management concepts and ideas has taken place. In the 1980s there was a strong focus on the three E's, meaning efficiency, effectiveness and

economy; in the 1990s there was a shift towards quality and best value. In both periods (new) public management reform focused on imitation of economic and managerial principles stemming from the private sector. Under these reforms, public service organizations were frequently reconstructed as quasi-independent single product or single function operating units (agencification).

At the beginning of the 21st century, there seems to be less demand for a NPM that simply imitates business practices in public sector organizations regardless of their tasks and external environment. What started as a reasoning from “inside out” developed into empirical analysis and theorizing from “outside in” (Metcalf & Richards, 1993: 118). The increasing importance of the governance concept suggests that there is more and more recognition that the main sources of governments’ management problems are organizational interdependence and organizational diversity (Metcalf, 1999). This implies that policy outcomes are not so much achieved through a single organization but rather through coordinated action of networks of organizations from the public, private and/or nonprofit sectors.

The shifts and evolution of public management ideas over time has important implications for best practice. What was considered best practice ten years ago might no longer be best practice today. Yet, the reputation capital of well-publicized and marketed best-practice cases frequently outlasts their “competitive advantage.” For instance, New Zealand is still perceived as a frontrunner in terms of NPM in many other OECD countries. This international reputation was built when New Zealand early on implemented a set of radical NPM reforms. Many of these have been quietly dropped, although its budgetary and accounting reforms continue to be very influential. Moreover, there has been very little discussion of the negative consequences of the New Zealand reforms that were revealed in the extensive Schick (1996) review. (Editor’s note: see issue 1 volume 3 of this journal (Spring 2000) for a self-critique of the New Zealand reforms.) Instead, the international scientific community mainly deals with the question of whether New Zealand reforms can be successfully exported to other countries (see, e.g., Laking, 1999).

It is also conceivable that what was once best practice can have a revival later. This trend can be observed when it comes to citizen participation and consultation. Many NPM critics always claimed that empowerment is not a new invention of NPM. As a matter of fact, governments began to promote public participation in the late 1960s, in a wave of enthusiasm and pressure for participatory democracy. Nevertheless, most traditional consultation processes asked citizens to respond to a predetermined menu of options drafted by bureaucrats. They rarely allow participants to discuss issues of values and identities and, as a result, they encourage advocacy rather than exploring accommodation.

In the 1990s, these issues have gained new relevance (see the comparison of traditional and innovative consultation processes in O’Hara, 1998, chapter 6). The availability of modern information technology (IT) raises new questions about public consultation processes with citizens. On the one hand, IT allows government to reach out to groups of citizens that would not have been consulted with traditional consultation instruments. These may be citizens living in remote areas, or with physical handicaps. On the other hand, IT may also create a new digital divide within a society between the computer literate population and the “have-nots.”

Thus, best-practice cases become outdated, and, hence, eventually “bad practice” over time. Moreover, public management practices that were unique at a certain point of time may become routine practice as the innovation spreads across the public sector or even countries. The British Citizen’s Charter Mark Unit tries to deal with this problem by giving each Charter Mark Award a kind of “date of durability.” This means that Charter Marks are only awarded for three years (Citizen’s Charter Unit, 1996: 7). This implies for researchers that best-practice cases have to be communicated fast and effectively to decision-makers in the public sector. It also means to explicate the demands that each time period puts on public management.

Of course, these demands are also a function of their specific environment. Some attention to the role of contextual factors in best-practice case analysis follows.

3.3. The historical and spatial context

Observers often attend only to the presence or absence of reform activities. In many cases, they overlook starting points. Yet, taking the perspective of the starting point may shed a new light on conventional interpretations of (new) public management reforms. In the extreme case, countries that are considered to be ‘backward’ regarding NPM may be actually on the forefront because they implemented certain elements under a different heading in the past. As a result, there is no need for these countries to do what some other countries are doing at present.

For example, Sweden implemented agencification about 300 years ago. This means that Swedish ministries were always relatively small. Unlike Sweden, British Ministries were relatively big, so that a decision was made in the 1980s to contract out “operational matters” to agencies. The process of agencification in the United Kingdom attracted a lot of attention internationally. Other countries like Korea and Italy followed a similar reform path, setting up new agencies for service delivery.

In federal countries like Germany this kind of institution-building was not observed for a somewhat different reason. Firstly, according to the German constitution, service delivery is the task of the Länder (states) unless a task is allocated explicitly to the Federation (see Art. 30, Art.70 and Art. 83 of the German Basic Law). Secondly, a wide variety of agencies had already been set up in the 1970s (Schuppert, 1981).

This shows that there are functional equivalents for carrying out public tasks. Therefore, it is important for researchers to map institutions before declaring one specific organizational form or management method best practice. Expressed differently, it is necessary to get a picture of the whole zoo first. Otherwise, there will be little comprehension why specific public management reforms were or were not undertaken.

4. Answers from theory

4.1. Universalism versus culturalism

The central question regarding comparative (private and public) management is whether management techniques can be transferred from one cultural or societal system to another.

There seem to be two basic positions with respect to this issue within the scientific comparative management community: the so-called universalists put forward the “culture-free hypothesis” according to which management techniques are independent of culture and country-specific factors and universally valid. The so-called culturists take the opposite position by stating that different social values, norms and behavioral patterns matter. According to the “culture-bound hypothesis,” different management techniques are required in different cultural contexts.

The same distinction is found within the subfield of the comparative management community concerned with NPM: some authors claim that modern administrative practices have global utility and are essentially value neutral. According to Christopher Hood (1995: 104f), Osborne and Gaebler are the most famous proponents of this view. These authors argue that the world-wide ascendancy of a new global paradigm in public administration is as inevitable as the rise of “progressive” public management ideas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992: 325 and 328). Hood also places Peter Aucoin, who claims the “internationalization of public management” (Aucoin, 1990: 134), and Michael Barzelay, who argues for a “postbureaucratic paradigm” replacing an earlier “bureaucratic paradigm” (Barzelay, 1992: 116ff), in the universalist camp.

On the other hand, there are a number of administrative scientists who deny that Anglo-Saxon managerialism can or should be adopted elsewhere, not even in the Western European countries with which they have the most in common in terms of political, administrative, and cultural norms and values. Kickert and Beck Jørgensen argue that public management techniques depend on the national framework in which they are embedded, that is, the national state and administration (Kickert & Beck Jørgensen, 1995: 505). In a similar vein, Wright warns of the danger of seeing the administrative world through Anglo American spectacles (1994: 116f) and stresses that national contexts have to be taken into account for the formulation of modernization policies (1994: 122).

Regardless of whether scholars adopted the culture-free or culture-bound hypothesis, this debate has neither been very fruitful to advance comparative administrative sciences nor has it been helpful to practitioners. It rather reinforced stereotypes, and, to some degree, has been a barrier to progress. According to the universalists, an ideal-type Weberian bureaucracy (by definition something that never existed in reality) is being replaced by an ideal-type NPM. As we know today, this an oversimplification. The truly comparative literature shows that some countries used new public management more than others and that NPM works for some parts of the public sector, but not for others (OECD, 1997: 28).

The culturalists also oversimplify, drawing the line between Anglo-Saxons and Europeans and overlooking differences between Europeans, differences between the Westminster model and the American system, or even between Westminster systems. The main difference between Anglo-Saxons and Europeans is in their legal tradition, that is, Roman law versus common law. This may matter for some areas but not for others. For example, it seems reasonable to assume that the provision of general information through the Web in the public sector is rather a function of the general “Web connectedness” of the private sector and civic society in general than of the legal framework. However, the extent of information that

governments provide to the public strongly depends on information acts, such as freedom of information laws.

It becomes obvious that the contextuality of best practice varies from case to case. An excellent case in point is the leadership issue that is considered as an important challenge for the civil service in many OECD countries.

Even though this classical topic has many aspects there are two key issues that are highly relevant in many civil service systems. First, the public administration (as well as the private sector) in many OECD countries has to deal with critical skill shortages in the labor market due to demographic changes. Recruitment of skilled labor is especially pressing for senior civil service positions since many OECD countries used early retirement quite extensively in order to deal with downsizing. Another consequence of the strong focus on downsizing in many civil services in the 1980s and 1990s is a certain neglect of career planning, career development and workforce planning in general.

In view of the changes in the external environment of the public sector and the endogenous changes resulting from public sector reforms, hiring motivated and skilled leaders for public sector positions is not only a numerical but also a qualitative problem. This means that across most OECD countries public organizations have to ponder on the question of what new management competencies are needed and how to attract and retain a workforce with the new profile, including HR professionals. As a result, there is an international demand for best-practice case studies related to the competitiveness and attractiveness of public service in the labor market.

Nevertheless, the public administration in different countries still has different traditions and culture. These culture-bound elements are of particular importance when it comes to employees' perception of leadership. For instance, Parry's and Sarros' detailed empirical analysis of leadership behavior in the Australian public sector (1994) reveals significant differences between Australians and Americans in their perceptions of leadership. Their work is based on the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire developed by Bass (1985), who also developed the distinction between transformational and transactional leaders. Whereas a transformational leader will enable followers to transcend self-interest for a higher collective purpose, mission, ideal or vision, transactional leadership is an essential management behavior. Transformational leadership consists of the following components (Parry & Sarros, 1994: 3):

- Charisma: This is evidenced when leaders elicit from followers strong feelings of identity with the leader, send clear messages of purpose and mission and heighten expectations through images and meanings. Charisma is further divided into two components, one being inspirational motivation, the other being idealized influence.
1. Inspirational motivation involves the projection of messages by the leader so that followers can envision a future state of affairs to which they, along with their leader, can aspire.
 2. Idealized influence occurs when the leader, through the strength of this or her own character and behavior, provides a model or example for others to identify with and follow.

- Intellectual stimulation: Leaders who encourage followers to think about problems in new ways, and who are more concerned with ideas than processes, are intellectually stimulating.
- Individualized consideration: The main characteristic of this leadership factor is the cultivation of intense one-to-one relationships and empathy for individuals.

Statistical analysis of survey results shows that transformational leadership in Australia consists of idealized influence, inspirational motivation and individualized consideration (Parry & Sarros, 1994: 21). In the United States, however, transformational leadership does not include individualized consideration. Thus, for Australian managers to be successful they must strongly rely on skills relating to individualizing their consideration of followers. Followers, however, report a lack of idealized influence and individualized consideration in Australia.

These findings on cultural differences have important implications for management training. It would not make much sense to train American managers to improve their competencies in individualized consideration. Australian managers, however, must focus their training on activities designed to enhance their display of idealized influence and idealized consideration and, to a lesser extent, inspirational motivation.

The leadership topic shows that some leadership dimensions can be transferred from one country to another because the same challenges apply in all countries. Other leadership dimensions are more culture-specific and should not be transferred internationally. As the next section will show, an institutional contingency approach may provide a useful framework to analyze which management issues or dimensions are culture-bound and which management practices are more independent from institutional and cultural contexts.

5. An institutional contingency approach as an analytical framework for case studies

Hood (1998) proposes grid-group cultural theory for a culturist approach towards recurring public management problems. According to Hood (1998: 9), “grid” denotes the degree to which public management is conducted according to well-understood rules. “Group,” by contrast, denotes the extent to which public management involves coherent collectivities, which are institutionally differentiated from other spheres of society. Put together, these two dimensions produce a 2×2 matrix of basic organizational types: “hierarchical” (high “group,” high “grid”), fatalist (high “grid,” low “group”), “egalitarian” (high “group,” low “grid”) and “individualist” (low “group,” low “grid”).

As Hood goes on to illustrate, formal and informal rules and the way they are related to each other determine to a large degree organizational reality and are at the heart of many public management problems. Nevertheless, the problem of public administration in a given country is that not all public organizations adhere to one polar type (or ideal-type) of Hood’s categories but that there are different polar types interacting with each other. For example, a ministry will rather tend to be structured the “hierarchical way” whereas some semiautonomous agency may be structured the individualist way. Often different rationalities can also

be found within a public organization, especially if part of it goes down a reform path but the rest is managed in the conventional way.

In spite of the inherent risk in cultural theory of an overcategorization, cultural theory has the merit of highlighting sociological properties of public organizations' environment that influence the structure and functioning of public organizations. Contingency theory adopted a similar perspective. However, it is more focused on technical factors that are of salience to organizational structure (for more details, see Löffler, 1997: 30–34). Nevertheless, a kind of institutional contingency approach could be useful as an analytical framework for best-practice case studies by focusing attention to what degree a promising public management practice is contingent on institutional and cultural factors.

The proposed institutional contingency approach consists of three functional classes of institutional and cultural factors (compare also, Lüder, 1992: 108):

- Stimuli: Events that occur at the initial stage of an innovation/modernization process and create a critical situation that induces political and administrative actors to search for or accept new solutions.
- Structural variables: Institutional and cultural characteristics of a given administrative and political system that are the necessary conditions for a specific best practice to work. In economic literature, they are typically referred to as *ceteris paribus* conditions.
- Implementation barriers: Institutional and cultural characteristics of the administrative and political system and behaviors of stakeholders that inhibit the successful implementation of foreign best-practice cases in the domestic context.

The research design of a public management case study has to make these formal and informal factors explicit. Thus, a basic research task is to analyze to what degree a public management practice assessed as best practice is dependent on a specific institutional and cultural context.

Three categories of public management practices may be distinguished:

- Highly culture-bound public management practices that only work in a specific institutional and cultural environment. As a result, they may not even be transferable from one jurisdiction to another within a country. For example, innovations that are possible in Oregon may not be transferable into other US state governments because they are less homogeneous and lack the “experimental” culture characteristic of Oregon (on the public sector innovations in Oregon, see Tryens, 1997).
- “Culturally-supported” public management practices that can be exchanged within similar institutional and cultural environments. This kind of public management practice works best in specific administrative systems as illustrated by the Nordic, Napoleonic, Germanic, and Westminster models. Alternatively, “culturally-supported” public management practices may be a function of specific policy fields. For example, it seems that public health, environmental policies and housing lend themselves easier to consultation processes with citizens than other more technical policy fields such as budgeting (at least at the national level).
- “Culturally-independent” public management practices that work in political and

administrative systems meeting some common minimum standards. For example, knowledge about best-practice web sites in public administration may be easily transferable to any government that has entered into the information age.

Whereas public decision-makers will be inclined to think of their organization or jurisdiction as unique, consultants will be more inclined to apply best practice that worked in one case to all kinds of other cases and countries as well. Therefore, a sound case study methodology is important to provide guidance as to what perspective is valid in a specific case. The proposed institutional contingency approach has the merit to trigger analysis whether and to what degree a given public management practice is conditioned by institutional and cultural factors. If certain contextual variables can be assumed to influence the “success” of a specific public management practice (in a positive or negative way) they should to be highlighted in the case study in some user-friendly way.

6. The need for redefining the concept of best practice

The above considerations show that the term best practice is presumptuous. Neither academics nor experienced public managers are able to make sound judgments about what constitutes best practice, especially from an international perspective. Therefore, it is more appropriate to speak of good practice or smart practice.

The term good practice is also logically more consistent. As discussed before, best practice is a relative concept with respect to the following dimensions:

- **Performance:** Case studies are often not the result of thorough evaluations, but self-reported. Nevertheless, the demonstrated results are usually significant and credible enough to make the case relevant to others who could not achieve the same results.
- **Time:** Good-practice cases may provide the answers to specific public management problems at a given point of time. When external circumstances change the exemplified solutions may no longer apply.
- **Context:** Most management practices depend on a varying number of institutional and cultural parameters. They are transferable within all contexts where these parameters apply.

In some extreme cases, public management practices may be strongly culture-bound. But even then, best-practice cases in public management will remain highly important as a carrier of knowledge about existing public management reforms. At the minimum, they raise the awareness of decision-makers that public management can be done differently. This means that best practice has an important function as a catalyst of reforms.

Even though this sounds trivial, it is important to have in mind that most civil service systems are a rather “closed shop” from a global point of view. Unlike in the private sector, international mobility in the public sector is the exception rather than the rule. As a result, civil servants have few possibilities to “see their own system with a stranger’s eyes” from the outside, like the Persian Usbek in Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters*. Thus, international comparative research on best practice in public administration is vital to nourish the thinking and

debate about “which form of government comes closest to rationality” (Montesquieu, 1998: 156).

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