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## Book review

### **Innovating with Integrity. How Local Heroes are Transforming American Government**

Sandford Borins; Washington, D.C., Georgetown University Press, 1998, 346 pages

Despite increasing production of case studies on innovation in public management, we still know very little about the conditions that are conducive to public sector innovation. Sandford Borins' study of public sector innovations is especially noteworthy because it engages in "serious hypothesis-testing rather than just more hypothesis-generation," as Alan D. Altshuler puts it in his foreword.

The data used in Borins' empirical study are drawn from applications submitted to the Ford Foundation-Kennedy School of Government's state and local government innovations awards program. The author limits his pool to the 217 innovative public programs reaching the semifinal round (about the top five percent of applicants) between 1990 and 1994. Selection criteria for the American semifinalists were the novelty of the innovation, its significance in addressing an important problem of both local and national concern, the value it brings to its clients and other citizens, and its transferability.

Borins analyses the characteristics of public sector innovations based on the descriptions provided by the applicants. One major finding is that *innovations were most frequently holistic*, meaning that the innovators took a systems approach to problem solving, coordinated the activities of several organizations to deal with a problem, or provided multiple services to program clients (p. 21). In other words, the empirical research suggests that successful innovations span organizational boundaries.

Before addressing the who question, Borins uses several research designs to confirm that Osborne's and Gaebler's well-known reinvention principles are, to a large degree, valid. Concerning the question who initiates innovations in the public sector, the author's finding is surprising: *The most frequent initiators are middle managers and front-line workers*. As Borins stresses in the subtitle of the book, the true leaders are local heroes that act from within organizations.

The analysis also shows that *internal problems, opportunities and crises (with external visibility) can be identified as important factors leading to innovations*. Relating these factors to change agents yields three paths to innovations: "politicians responding to external crisis, newly appointed agency heads restructuring organizations, and middle-level and front-line workers responding to internal problems and taking advantage of opportunities" (p. 63). Interestingly enough, leadership change per se does not seem to be particularly conducive to successful innovation.

Borins finds that the resolution of the *planning versus groping* debate (see, e.g., Behn 1988 and Golden 1990) is case-specific: large capital investment programs that involve the coordination of a large number of organizations, innovations with clear cause and effect relationships, and innovations based on partnerships require planning. Groping is called for when new programs are designed.

The study also includes a detailed analysis of the implementation process of innovations. Thus, the author investigates obstacles to innovations, the financing and organizing of innovations, as well as the measurement and verification of results of innovations. One major result of the author's empirical research is that *most obstacles that innovators had encountered were internal to the bureaucracy*. Thus, the empirical analysis confirms what is considered common knowledge in policy and administrative research (Glor 1997: 49).

Borins offers two explanations for the preponderance of internal opposition. Since most innovations were internal to the bureaucracy, politicians and the public were not really aware of them. The other explanation is that the innovations in the sample are those that were sufficiently acceptable to politicians and to the public, so they did not draw external opposition.

The statistical analysis reveals that the most important requirements to overcome obstacles are persuasion and accommodation. Borins recommends resorting to hardball tactics as the last resort. Another set of practical recommendations which flow from Borins' analysis is that would-be innovators should scan the environment and plan for the future.

In terms of funding, Borins concludes that potential innovators should seek regular government appropriations. This is a particularly promising financing strategy for public goods like policing. Successful innovations rarely rely on user fees and private sector donations or grants. However, he cautions us that, since the award program excludes innovations that are not funded by state or local governments, the sample may underestimate private sector financing of public sector innovation.

Finally, the author examines the results dimension. As he puts it, at some point in the innovation journey, funding agencies will ask for evidence of measurable outcomes. Also politicians and citizens will want to know 'where's the beef'? According to Borins, the verification of results is also a critical issue for the innovation award itself. Otherwise, there is the risk the external recognition of innovation programs may not be related to superior performance.

The author finds that *all successful innovations start with setting goals but most measures of success are self-selected by the innovators*. Thus, "the most widely reported outcome of innovations is that the program's goals were being met" (p. 104). Yet, the achievement of self-reported results is not sufficient to win an award. The Ford-KSG awards program seeks to verify the results of innovations in four ways. First, the examiners ask for independent external evaluations of the innovation. Second, the semi-finalists have to indicate whether their programs had received other awards or media attention. Third, the applicants' own estimates of potential replicability or expressions of interest or actual replication by others are used as evaluation criteria. A fourth way to judge the results of innovation programs is to determine their sustainability.

The policy-specific chapters complement the general quantitative analysis of innovation programs in the first part of the book by switching to case studies. In order to get a flavor of

this more detailed analysis, Borins' findings in information technology and community building will be discussed. Both policy areas are of high relevance in today's e-government and governance debate.

Borins acknowledges that large-scale IT investment projects have high failure rates. He observes that information systems are changing rapidly and concludes that information technology innovators must adjust to this fact from the outset by building open systems that can incorporate advances without having to be fundamentally changed. IT innovators should also be aware that politicians, agency heads, and clients are usually technically rather naïve. Thus, information technology innovators have to be able to communicate their vision to those groups. Successful innovators must also involve the private sector in information technology projects and use innovative ways of funding in order to ensure an appropriate return on technology investments.

Community building is a very different area of innovation compared to IT. Yet, they have in common that they touch upon many different policy areas. In the case of community building the ultimate goal is that the public sector and the community are mutually reinforcing. Taking the example of policing, the author's analysis shows that the paradigm known as community policing has become dominant in policing innovations. One of the basic cornerstones of community policing is that front-line officers become involved in finding and solving problems. As Borins puts it, "the frequency of innovations initiated by front-line officers becomes an indirect measure of success of the concept of community policing" (p. 215). Similar to the innovations in information technology, successful innovators have to be effective in communication and be able to cooperate in a productive way with various communities.

Borins concludes by pointing out the following key messages to practitioners and to the research community:

- innovative ideas of middle management and front-line staff should be encouraged;
- theoretical models in their field matter and should be used; and,
- New Public Management takes place in the real world.

For the discussion of Borins' research findings it is useful to recall the Ford-KSG evaluation criteria. Novelty is a necessary but not sufficient condition in order to win the Ford-KSG award. Innovation programs also have to matter and they have to be transferable. Applying these criteria to this piece of research and the resulting publication raises two issues. First, is Borins' research a significant contribution to knowledge about the generation of innovations in the governmental process? Second, what kind of inferences might be drawn about effective practice from this knowledge?

Regarding the book's theoretical contribution, Borins' research definitely advances the existing body of knowledge on (New Public Management) innovations by testing various innovation theories and other unchallenged hypotheses such as Osborne's and Gaebler's reinvention principles. At the same time, Borins expands "the data that Osborne and Gaebler and others have used to elucidate new public management paradigms" (p. 9). The author also adopts a New Public Management perspective in order to interpret the results of his empirical research from the point of view of the New Public Management paradigm.

This methodological choice may be considered both as a strength and a weakness of the

book. The strength is that the New Public Management paradigm, which is rather “an extended family of ideas” (Barzelay 1992: 116) than a coherent approach, gets some empirical underpinning. The weakness is that the New Public Management perspective has a strong focus on organizational challenges and difficulties *within* the spheres of politics and administration as well as *intra-organizational* prerequisites and conditions of effective and efficient government action. However, the increasing importance of networks between public, private and non-profit organizations undermine New Public Management with its intra-organizational focus on objectives and results (Rhodes 1997: 55).

As a matter of fact, the results of Borins’ research may be interpreted quite differently from a governance perspective. This theoretical approach provides an integrated perspective on internal and external steering problems. As a normative approach, governance may be understood as the transparent, open, partnership-oriented and accountable networking and cooperation between politics, public administration, business, associations, and non-profit organizations in order to prepare and implement effective and high-quality public policy programs.

The governance perspective also changes the inferences to be drawn from Borins’ book. As the subtitle of the book points out, Borins’ main finding is that local heroes are transforming American government rather than elected leaders. This is a very important result because it reveals a serious leadership and even governance problem in the United States (which remains to be verified in other countries as well). As the statistical correlation of conditions leading to innovation and initiators of innovation shows, leaders commanding large organizations or even nations seem to be willing to live with problems (as long as there is no visible crisis). Career public servants below the agency head level eventually solve them. Whereas governments are rowing, bureaucrats are steering!

In other words, New Public Management does exist in reality, but in most cases it does not touch or challenge the political system or civic society. Indeed, the author’s statistical analysis also shows that most obstacles to innovations come from inside the bureaucracy. Borins’ explanation is that elected politicians and citizens either did not notice the innovation or they accepted the innovation. Given the fact that most innovations were not subjected to an independent evaluation, there is much evidence speaking in favor of Borins’ first explanation. These empirical findings show once more that New Public Management may have resulted in efficiency gains, but in spite of its customer rhetoric public sector innovators rarely asked citizens what they really needed or wanted.

Instead, successful innovators strive to fulfill self-defined goals. This raises important questions about the legitimacy of the innovations contained in the sample. Expressed differently, local heroes may innovate with (ethical) integrity but not necessarily with (political) legitimacy. Insufficient consultation and involvement of the public and elected officials is even more worrying in view of the large target populations of the innovations studied by Borins: his statistical analysis shows that IT innovations affect especially large populations (on average, about 300,000), which is over half the target population.

All in all, Sandford Borins’ research is highly valuable to the community of researchers as well as to would-be innovators. Nevertheless, his interpretation of empirical findings is clearly influenced by the first wave of New Public Management public sector reforms. Yet, his findings point to governance problems that must be dealt with in the next generation of

reform. It remains to be seen whether the next generation of public sector innovations will focus on these problems. The research community, as well as practitioners, would benefit from a follow-up empirical study by Sandford Borins.

Elke Löffler\*

*Bristol Business School, U.W.E., Coldharbour Lane,  
Bristol BS16 10Y, U.K.*

*E-mail address: elke.loeffler@gmx.net.*

\* Corresponding reviewer

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Elke Löffler is a Senior Research Fellow at Bristol Business School, University of the West of England.

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