The Changing Paradigm-Implications for Ghanaian Public Administrators

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1. **Abstract**

What are the implications of the changing paradigm for public administrators? The 1980s were a tumultuous decade for public bureaucracies the world over. The political leadership that came into office in Anglo-America and Europe were convinced that public bureaucracies of their countries were flawed. –they were inefficient, resistant to change and exerting too much influence over policy- they resolved to perform a radical surgery on their public bureaucracies. This resolve brought in its trail a shift of paradigm in relation to public management, the ongoing change affected countries south of the Sahara including Ghana. This article argues that the change has implications for public administrators both in terms of the challenges it poses and opportunities that it offers. The challenge is to all public servants, but the biggest chunk is to public managers. The article proposes continued education, learning and training as one part of the answer to the challenge. This seemed the most rational response to coping with the challenge; become versatile and adaptable to serve government, taxpayers and the private sector better.
2. **Introduction: emergence of a new public management paradigm**

The last two decades saw the emergence of ‘a cultural revolution’ in public management (Yeatmen 1990:13, Politt 1990:205). This revolution traced its roots to the uprising of the ‘reinventing government’ movement in America which advocated a rethinking of the role of government, they argued that, considering the problems of modern government, reinvention is the only option left (Osborne and Garbler 1993; Gore, 1993). Reinvention of government requires that government should move away from the old approach to a new approach. For those who owned the underlying ideas of reinventing of government, it was an inevitable shift rather than a temporary fad; it is a shift towards ‘entrepreneurialism’ (p.331).

The shift is not manifesting in only the US. Countries in Europe, Canada, Australia and other developed countries have had their fair share of feeling the shift (Metcalf and Richards 1990:156). Countries like Australia decided to reform their civil service along the line of the Thatcher reform in Britain (Hood 1990: 205-214). One important observation about the shift is that, it places a new emphasis on the organizational design for public sector management (Aucoin 1990).

Developing countries and their public administration systems were not left out in terms of the impact of the reinvention government revolution and its concomitant new public management ideology or paradigm. In his, ‘In the throes of a turbulent environment…’, Appiah (1998:1) captures this impact vividly by noting that, “public administration in Ghana has been in the throes of a turbulent environment and had thus undergone decisive and penetrating changes since the 1980.” Rethinking the role of government paradigm got diffused into Africa via the IMF, OECD and the World Bank which used it as conditionality for countries to access credit from the Fund and the Bank (Appiah 1998, Brett, 1998, Oyugi 1989). The adoption of this idea of a new public management necessitated the restructuring, redesigning and redefinition of the function and authority structure of public bureaucracies throughout Africa.
in this The resultant changes and challenges emerging from paradigmatic shift in respect managing public organizations have implications for public administrators. The question posed this article is: what are the implications of the observed changing paradigm in theory and practice for public administrators. The article discusses some of the implications with examples from Ghana; it relates some of the issues to countries cases in Africa.

The one caveat the article places on the discussions is that its relevance is mainly to the “managerial” ranks of public administrators. This qualification is for two reasons. First, empirical evidence confirms that the experiences and insights of the changes have direct influence particularly on managers in public service. Second, in functional terms, it is in the more senior positions where one perceives the most fundamental change to be underway.

In trying to pull together my thoughts for the paper, I first endeavoured to detect if any broad-based factors were impacting on the shape and functions of the Ghanaian public services. I concluded, without in any way attempting an historical and detailed analysis that over the last decade or so there were and are two such factors.

The first, and most obvious, is ‘a reversal of the expanding roles of governments’ and, in consequence, the numbers of public servants. Second, and more subtle, I perceive a change in ‘the culture of our governments’, and consequently in the roles and functions of public administrators.

3. **Short history of public administration in Ghana/Africa**

Political development aside, governments which were in power in Ghana from 1957 (from independence) through 1960’s, and until quite recently, expanded the scope of state services. Adedeji (1975:133) wrote that “…the preoccupation of African governments during the first decade of independence was the rapid expansion of the civil service (public bureaucracy) that they have not been able to give much attention to professionalizing public administration in their
prospective countries”. This followed, naturally, that for Ghana’s public administrators both functions and numbers increased during this era.

This was the time that public servants were required increasingly to become deliverers of the services which those who were elected (politicians) determined should be made available.

Management roles increased and broadened. Public service structures became highly layered and more complex following the expansion. Of course, the tasks drove the numbers and, therefore, the ranks of the public service both expanded and also became more functionally diverse.

4. Global context of the changing paradigm

Africa, Ghana in particular, is not unique in respect of changing paradigm. Even a cursory look at the UK - the former colonial-boss of Ghana in the mid 1970s revealed the same pattern. France, Germany, Canada, United States, India, Australia and New Zealand etc. experienced similar public sector growth and for similar reasons. Cheung (1997) observed public sector reforms could have covered some similar policy and instrumental tools being adopted in different political circumstance for vastly different reasons and with different impacts. Such a development is not without instances in administrative theory.

Sequentially, first in the United Kingdom then in the United States and finally in Canada, governments at all levels came face to face with deficits and debts. The governmental paradigm began to change.

Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979, following what was known in Britain as the “winter of discontent.” Among other goals, she was determined to deal not merely with annual deficits, but to begin to pay down the national debt. Mrs. Thatcher believed that reductions in the rates of taxation were essential to a revitalization of the British economy and that dealing with deficits and the national debt was essential to a lowering of tax rates. Privatization was one tool she deployed to raise money and to reduce costs to government so as to achieve her goals (Peters and Savoie 1994: 418).
Privatization, and its Canadian and African cousins “commercialization,” “denationalization” or “divestiture” is blamed by some as the cause of at least part of the upheaval in the public services of the countries which have adopted a policy of transferring state assets and activities to the private sector. This article submits, to the contrary, that privatization is merely one means used by governments as they seek to reduce first deficits and, later, debt. The real cause for the present state of uncertainty for many public servants in several developed and developing countries is the sea change in governmental priorities.

The social and economic priorities of African development of the 1960’s, ‘70’s and ‘80’s despite utterances to the contrary, no longer lead most political agendas. “Real politick,” means that fiscal and financial rectitude are election winners and not social support programmes. It is pertinent to note at this juncture that change in political priorities have occurred in the post World War II period and are still occurring faster than the machinery of governments can adapt.

5. The change: role and culture of government business

The basic paradigm which is changing fast in developed, developing; newly developing or transitional economies is a reversal of growth in and of government in favour of a contraction of the role and functions of government. This sea change is fast being diffused into management and administrative systems and practices of countries through communication and information technology and globalization (Khor 2001:6).

One can easily distinguish the alternations in public service roles, functions and numbers, in direct consequence of reductions in the activities of governments, from those influenced by what we see as change in the “culture” of many governments. At the admitted risk of trying to state a complex proposition simply, it is asserted that ministers, or other elected office holders, are adopting more “executive” type roles, or, at least, more executive postures. In such executive stances, elected office holders seemingly are less content to focus on policy, strategy if you will, and much more inclined to tactical action, or its presentational equivalent.
The reasons for these changes, one may argue are much less important to public managers and their colleague politicians today than the fact of change. The shifts in size, and therefore in function, while unwelcome from the perspective of the administrator, nevertheless are straightforward. The more subtle shifts in the culture of governments, are much more difficult to absorb as they are less tangible (Minogue 1999 :24).

The situation is similar to the latter days of the Roman Republic where those who sought to honour the customary processes of the Republic’s glory days were in conflict with those who considered that, de facto, the business of the Senate and people of Rome had to move on.

Historically, in a parliamentary system of government the highest calling of the public servant has been politically dispassionate analysis within the realities of political policy imperatives, identification of possible options for action, a preferred option recommendation and a commitment to executing the government decision, whatever it might be. Of course this important role still exists today.

But today there is the suspicion that there are others, not public administrators, who increasingly are out there to short circuit the analysis and focus on shorter term, tactical, political “deliverables”. Most frequently these others are likely to be “advisors” whose political allegiance is unequivocal and who have few if any long term career considerations at risk. If this assumption is correct, then it is consistent with my thesis of a growing shift in culture.

It is striking to state that, separately, either of the two suggested factors pushing the button of change can be addressed, overtime, by Ghanaian public administrators. However, taken together, “redeployment”, “downsizing”, “rightsizing” and fundamental shifts in roles, result in considerable attitudinal dislocation for most members of Ghana’s public services, despite rank and regardless whether employed at the national, regional, municipal or district levels.

This brings to mind some very fair questions which might be put to those who are elected representatives of the people. They include, “What do you, the elected representatives of the
people, want from us, the public service employees? “What roles do you want us to play?”
“What functions do you want us to discharge?” “What skills do you seek?” “How would you
characterize that which you wish us to be or become?” “At the more senior levels, are we
executives, managers, advisors, or functionaries?” “Most basically, do you know, do you care,
or have you thought about these questions at all?

These questions are important also to Ghanaian taxpayers. Ghanaian taxpayers want, and are
entitled to expect, value for money from their public services. It follows, therefore, that the
primary responsibility rests with elected governments to say with some precision what is wanted
from public administrators.

Having said this, realistically, we know that the questions raised are unlikely to be addressed by
politicians, other than in a context of “having to”. In other words, one do not envisage that
elected representatives at any level are likely to initiate “root and branch” reviews and
assessments of the future and required roles of Ghana’s public administrators, other than in
tactical, quite specific and consequential circumstances.

By way of contrast, as Margaret Thatcher’s government contemplated a lesser direct
involvement in the workings of the economy, the roles of the civil service overall and in
particular of certain departments, such as Energy, were reviewed, considered and a blueprint laid
down. This is not judging the conclusions, one is only recognizing that in a country whose
governmental systems are similar to those of Britain, the public service should be judged to be so
important that a careful review is warranted. Since then in Britain there has been a series of
rigorous department specific studies, helped by outside consultants, directed toward
appropriateness of tasks, indicated changing requirements and new incentive-based systems of
remuneration (Savoie 1994).

From time to time one hears comments that Ghana’s public administrators should become “more
business like.” I have been asked many times by both my Bachelor and Masters students in
Public Administration, and by some politician friends, whether I agree. My answers are “yes” and “no.” I am not being equivocal. My view is that considering all public administration tasks and responsibilities to be in common is wrong. So, “yes.” For many tasks I would argue that superior commercial/business abilities are not merely desirable, probably those attributes are mandatory. Nevertheless, “No.” In other areas the education, training, and judgement which should be valued might have little to do with the “cut and thrust” of commerce and industry.

One appreciates that in saying this amount to espousing segmentation of Ghana’s public services. However, one would be surprised if that is not what, in fact, we have already.

It may be at the senior policy levels, where intellect and judgment count most, that individuals having quite different operational qualifications merge and commonly may be considered for the most senior appointments.

Undoubtedly upon reflection on the nature of contemporary political management one should be circumspect and reticent in saying that not all public administrators should be cast in the business management role, because the critical importance of the national economy and the solid business practices required in many aspects of public administration, suggest that many more administrators should know much more about both the theory and practice of business.

Again, a point made from time to time is that many public administrators have broader responsibilities and operate within greater constraints than do persons in the private sector. This proposition is unacceptable. One example will suffice. Lets take it that one is a director of one of Ghana’s top ranking investment banks or insurance company, both under the various pieces of applicable legislation, and under the law generally, we can conceive of no role which has higher duties nor one with greater potential liabilities.

That is not to say that some public administrators do not have significant and sometimes onerous responsibilities and duties. It is with the general proposition that take this issue.
While, my perspective is coloured by my time with my late father (a retired civil servant) it is affected also by my early years and education in one of the smallest and least developed regions in Ghana, and the very small town where we had lived for years. Our town has a population of about 1,500 people. The current chief was our next door neighbour. We are very fortunate in him and in most of his council of elders. However, it is on the then Local Councils’ few, full time career employees that we depend not only for delivery of social services, but for the formulation of policies which are sensible, affordable and generally in line with citizens’ expectations.

I know very well that it is a far cry from small Town/Local Council operations to the governmental affairs of large districts, municipalities, of regions and of Ghana. However, for me to consider the roles and effectiveness of the government of my Town/Local council is an important assist to a consideration of the impacts of changes in priorities of very much larger governments.

Most of the direct and obvious consequences of these changes in priorities public servants are experiencing already. I observe that these include reductions in numbers of positions, changes in roles and responsibilities, organizational realignment and, probably for some, reduced expectations of advancement. My observation is that there is little that could or can be done to avoid these initial and direct results, and only minimal action is possible to mitigate some of the more career damaging consequences for individuals. The fundamental challenge is for public administrators to equip themselves to contend better with a future which is far from clear.

I realize it is cold consolation, but public servants should be assured that there are few if any industrial or commercial activities which are not experiencing similar upheavals. The specific reasons may be different, but the effects on people, their careers and employment prospects essentially are the same. I had the opportunity to witness some of these when I was working with the Audit Service and later during my sojourning in Scandinavia and Canada (as a student), particularly in the 1980’s and early ‘90’s. Since then I continue to observe the effects of
globalization, ever newer technology, convergence, consolidation, mergers and acquisitions, to name but a few.

6. What’s the way out?

So, what can Ghanaian public administrators do to equip themselves better, individually and collectively, to contend with their changing environment?

First, there is no magic elixir, no single panacea which will do the trick. The only substantive answer I have found, and it is only a part answer, is further and continuing education and training.

Yes, I acknowledge that, in the absence of any determination of overall requirements, what new or enhanced knowledge and skills to acquire is problematic. However, I suggest that as change is certain to continue to be a fact of working life, that broadening the base of competencies is the only appropriate response, even if specific deployment of those competencies may be uncertain.

Surely, the public services are little different from other employments in the sense that whatever initial skills are possessed, those skills decay over time. Moreover, the rate of skills and applied knowledge decay is accelerating. The continuing education change is a mix of “topping up” existing competencies and acquiring new ones.

Whether we are considering Ghana’s public services or employment generally, I am convinced that, both for the employee and the employer, continuous, life long learning is the crucial element.

Let me illustrate how one employer acted to lift overall employee competencies and how one employee, with the continuing support of her employer, is moving from strength to strength.

When in May 1984 a colleague of my sister became Chief Executive of one of the top class hotels in Nigeria, an early action she took was to determine the skills and knowledge levels
across some 4,000 employees. The good news was that the skills and knowledge were comparable to other hotels in the Nigerian hotel industry. The bad news was that they were not competitive internationally. Her answer was to begin a company wide, noncompulsory learning programme extending from basic literacy and numeracy through to Higher National Diploma in Hotel/Institutional Management. The annual spend, in 1985 Nigerian naira, was approximately 8.6 million naira. The results included dramatically improved corporate results and, she was convinced of, happier, more self-confident employees.

My second story is more recent. I was invited to teach Officers from Sierra Leone (at the Military Academy and Training School, Teshie) in a course of middle rank military personnel considered to be “on the way up” whom their country sent to learn more about the new role of the military in promoting strategic development.

One attendee was a woman. I learned that in Sierra Leone she had qualified as a nurse and only incidently acquired some computer programming skills. Shortly after her education she joined the military as a recruit. In the army she learned that to get promotion as a female nurse was quite difficult. So she decided to go back to school to improve her computer programming skills. She graduated with a Microsoft Certified Certificate in programming and data management and, was transferred from the nursing department to records and information unit as a data manager/programmer. At the time of coming to Ghana she was promoted from the rank of corporal to Captain; she is now the manager of computer services and leader of the contingent that came to Ghana. And, the training at the Military Academy is to ready her for larger responsibilities.

There are two messages implicit in my vision of education as a means of better enabling people to cope more effectively with change. First, continuing, lifelong learning works for employees overall. Second, employers have to be committed and prepared to pay.

Many employers support education and training programmes for their employees. However, too many of these are specific to the employers’ shorter term operational requirements. While
useful, these more narrowly focused educational activities do little to broaden the overall base of employee competencies and thus fail to help in managing and otherwise dealing with continuing change.

The ways in which continuing learning opportunities can be made available are infinite. I suggest this is true particularly for public administrators. While working with the Navrongo Health Research Center in the Upper East region, I served both as a research officer and lectured at the University of Development Studies (UDS), Navrongo Campus. The concept of a specialized college for public administrators is not unique. However, those responsible for the continuing education of Ghana’s civil servants are relatively flexible. Simply as one example, when I was teaching at UDS I was approached to accept an Administrative Secretary, (Grade3), on a three-month secondment to audit my Social Development and Administration class. Such secondments were not unusual, particularly for the “high flyers.”

7. Conclusion

In the beginning of this article I discussed briefly whether a more “business like” culture was indicated. While arguing that this should not be a universal goal, I expressed support for a broader understanding of economic factors. This is but one dimension which continuing education could address.

As Day wrote:

The times they are a’changin. Bureaucracies, both public and private are shrinking. Directorial and managerial styles and cultures will continue to mutate, whether those at the apex of the decision pyramid are ministers or heads of businesses in the private sector. Simply, the old order changes and will continue to change (Day, 1997:12).

In magnitude, the latest expansion of Ghana’s public services was as great as or greater than its more recent contractions, but the time frame of the latter is shorter. However, while the human
Implications of significant shifts in size coupled with the dislocations implicit in a changed governmental ethos may elicit in many negative thoughts of the future, one suggests that, there can be an attainable and realistic vision.

In this light I conceive Ghanaian public administrators, over time, becoming increasingly more versatile and adaptable in consequence of a greater commitment by governments to a thoughtful, broader, more comprehensive programme of life long learning. As a result, governments would be served better, Ghanaian taxpayers would receive value and public administrators would become re-energized, acquire a greater sense of self worth and continue to contribute to what, in world terms, are excellent and honourable public services.
References