Chapter 13: Organizational Change and Operationalizing Sustainable Recreation—Lessons Learned From Two Natural Resource Governance Cases

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> There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.
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> —Niccolò Machiavelli

Purpose

This chapter synthesizes the organizational change literature germane to adaptive change in public-sector organizations. Specifically, we analyze the organizational changes needed to integrate sustainability into government-sponsored science, analytic planning tools, and management best practices. Next, a common set of organizational change factors are posited that contribute to successful change in public-sector organizations. These organizational change factors are elaborated by examining two descriptive organizational change cases from the natural resource governance field—first, the case of organizational change within the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service after the agency adopted an "ecosystem management" approach and, second, the case of the Forest Service's agency mandate to adopt a "sustainable recreation" approach to managing recreation throughout the National Forest System (NFS). We conclude with implications for interagency resource managers and change agents as well as for future research in this area.

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Problem Statement and Organizational Barriers

Public-sector organizations are under increasing pressure to continually adapt to a complex world characterized by rapid social and ecological change, financial austerity measures, and a more pluralistic and connected public.

Public-sector organizations are under increasing pressure to continually adapt to a complex world characterized by rapid social and ecological change, financial austerity measures, and a more pluralistic and connected public. It is, therefore, not surprising that the topic of organizational change dominates both the management and organizational behavior literature (Fernandez and Rainey 2006). However, it is easier to discuss and make plans for organizational change than to implement it on the ground. In fact, Wilson (1989: 221) has argued:

> We ought not to be surprised that organizations resist innovation. They are supposed to resist it. The reason an organization is created is in large part to replace the uncertain expectations and haphazard activities of voluntary endeavors with the stability and routine of organized relationships. The standard operating procedure (SOP) is not the enemy of an organization; it is the essence of organization.

Implementing organizational change is especially challenging for large government bureaucracies that were founded under a traditional command-and-control and hierarchical system of organizational management and in which demands for equity are easily enforced. Public managers and organizational scholars alike are experimenting with strategies designed to help public-sector organizations to become learning organizations—ever more nimble, responsive, and adaptive to changing societal conditions (Senge 2006). However, such organizations must overcome many organizational barriers to navigate this transition.

Integrating sustainability science, analytic tools, and management best practices into large public-sector organizations is challenging. Some of the organizational barriers to integrating sustainability include lack of clarity in definitions of sustainability concepts and outcomes, entrenched organizational culture, resistance to change, and lack of systems thinking (Cortner et al. 1998, Danter et al. 2000, Duarte 2015, Fernandez and Rainey 2006, Winter and Burn 2010). Given these significant barriers to organizational change, it is essential that strategies designed to foster organizational change be included in any strategic initiatives to integrate sustainability into public-sector organizations.

Fostering Successful Organizational Change

Given the significant barriers to organizational change discussed above, it is not surprising that a considerable body of knowledge has built up around the topic of how to successfully foster or manage organizational change in large, public-sector organizations. In fact, Van de Ven and Poole (1995), in their organizational theory literature synthesis, documented more than 1 million articles on the topic of organizational change. Although some theorists have portrayed the organizational change process as a linear process characterized by orderly steps (Kotter 1995), we view organizational change as a highly complex, dynamic, and iterative process as the organization adapts and learns from both internal and external stimuli and forces (Fernandez and Rainey 2006).

Despite the breadth of academic and professional interest in organizational change, there appears to be a significant degree of consensus about a shared set of organizational factors that contribute to the fostering of successful organizational change. In the following section, we elaborate those common change factors relevant to integrating sustainable recreation practices across public land management agencies. The following is a set of nine organizational change factors that have been adapted from the work of Kotter (1995) and Fernandez and Rainey (2006):

1. Establish a sense of urgency.
2. Form a powerful guiding coalition.
3. Develop a plan.
4. Build internal support.
5. Ensure top-management support.
6. Build external support.
7. Create short-term wins.
8. Leverage resources to implement change.
9. Institutionalize change.

Establish a sense of urgency—
Research has shown that agency leaders must aggressively identify and communicate the need for change (Fernandez and Rainey 2006, Kotter 1995) to persuade employees and external stakeholders that change is needed. This sense of urgency is often communicated in dramatic terms such as the loss of agency income unless everyone cooperates aggressively to implement needed changes. The crafting of a compelling vision of a preferred future is a critical step in this change process in which leaders communicate a vision that offers employees relief from worry and discomfort. Evidence also supports the need to engage employees and stakeholders broadly in a continuing dialogue about the opportunities to be realized through this change process.

Form a powerful guiding coalition—
Kotter (1995) found that successful organizational change initiatives may start with just one or two key change agents. These “fixers” often have a unique ability to catalyze disparate actors by leveraging close personal ties and informal avenues of

influence. However, over time, the leadership coalition must grow for the recommended changes to be institutionalized. Although senior management officials often form the core of these leadership groups, the guiding coalition will also include members outside this senior management core, including external stakeholders. Because of this inside-outside membership structure, these leadership coalitions often operate outside the normal agency hierarchy structure. As Kotter (1995: 4) posited, “Reform efforts generally demands activity outside of formal boundaries, expectations, and protocols.” The leadership coalition plays a key convener role, bringing stakeholders together to develop a shared assessment of the agency’s problems and opportunities, as well as building trust and communication. Successful leadership coalitions provide the change process an air of legitimacy.

Develop a plan—

Fernandez and Rainey (2006) observed that successful leadership coalitions are able to translate a compelling vision for change into a more practical course of action or strategy for implementing change. This strategy has concrete, measurable goals and a plan for implementing those goals. The strategy document serves as a roadmap for the agency, providing direction for how to institutionalize the desired agency changes. It is imperative that this change strategy rest on a foundation of very specific implementation goals and a sound causal theory to avoid ambiguity and confusion over how the strategy should be interpreted and implemented at different levels of the organization.

Build internal support—

Both Kotter (1995) and Fernandez and Rainey (2006) emphasized the importance of building internal agency support for proposed changes through widespread participation in the change process. This participation should include employees from different levels of the organization at each stage of the change process. Influential employees who may be disaffected by the proposed changes should be especially cultivated. At this stage of the change process, the leadership coalition is facilitating a political process of nurturing agency support for change. Van de Ven and Poole (1995) found that a crisis or external challenge to the agency often contributes to reducing opposition to change within the agency. Couching proposed changes in the supportive language of pride in the agency’s history and performance can also build internal support for change. However, both Kotter (1995) and Fernandez and Rainey (1996) asserted that widespread participation is not a panacea. Participation must be coupled with upper management support for proposed changes to be institutionalized.

Ensure top-level management support—

Although the role of individual change agents and leadership coalitions are critical to success, it is essential that upper management believes in and supports the change process. Fernandez and Rainey (2006) reported that, in the public sector, while the change process may be led by career civil servants, it is important that top-level civil servants and politically appointed executives be cultivated throughout the change process. There is some empirical evidence (Barzelay 2001) that change initiatives have failed precisely because of a lack of support from top-level management.

Build external support—
Successful change efforts in the public sector often cultivate key external interest groups and political actors during the change process. These stakeholders may control statutory policy changes needed to support proposed changes as well as the flow of resources needed to implement these changes. Fernandez and Rainey (2006) also pointed out that these political actors may also have the power to appoint top agency leaders who are sympathetic to the proposed agency changes. External support for agency change also applies to key interest groups such as industry associations or conservation coalitions that are politically engaged and influential. By cultivating these external groups, change actors can leverage the support of key political actors and politically appointed executives. Contrarily, not engaging these external stakeholder groups can lead to dissatisfaction and criticism of the change process.

Create short-term wins—
Kotter (1995) noted that successful change initiatives find ways of creating short-term goals, projects, and wins that serve to maintain and build momentum and institutional support for proposed changes. Institutional change can take several years to implement. Shorter term annual change projects, strategies, and programs can build a sense of optimism and hope around proposed changes and reduce the number of defectors from the leadership coalition. Although career civil service employees may complain about having to produce short-term projects, they can serve a vital purpose in an agency change initiative. Short-term wins can maintain the urgency surrounding change efforts and increase the chances that agency change will eventually be institutionalized.

Leverage resources to implement change—
Leadership coalitions supporting change must leverage scarce organizational resources to support the change process (Fernandez and Rainey 2006, Kotter 1995, Van de Ven and Poole 1995). Change is not cheap. Resources must be allocated and, at times, redirected from existing programs to support new activities such as training employees, implementing new programs, and restructuring the organization. Resources are needed to provide the agency with the administrative and technical capacity to implement the proposed changes. There are significant financial tradeoffs to be made in implementing change. Failure to provide adequate resources often leads to weak implementation and loss of momentum for the change initiative.

Institutionalize change—

For organizational change to be institutionalized, it must be firmly embedded in in an agency's culture (Fernandez and Rainey 2006, Kotter 1995). This means that proposed changes need to be rooted in the social norms, shared values, and, ultimately, the daily routines of employees. Empirical evidence supports several strategies to accomplish this objective. First, it is critical that change advocates demonstrate how the new approaches are improving the performance of the agency. An ongoing communications program will be necessary to reinforce these messages and establish a new set of social norms and daily routines. Change advocates also need to ensure that the next generation of upper management officials for the agency personify the new approaches. In fact, one poor succession decision at the top of an agency can set back years and years of change progress. Finally, it is also important that change advocates collect data and monitor the change implementation process to ensure that proposed changes are being fully adopted. In the public sector especially, frequent changes in political leadership can set back change initiative dramatically.

Strategies to foster successful organizational change can be illustrated by examining concrete cases in which agencies have worked diligently to institutionalize positive agency change. Below, we examine two such agency cases, providing a contextual background to the change initiative, summarizing barriers faced in pursuing successful organizational change, and assessing agency change strategies employed and prospects for positive agency change in the future.

Case #1: ecosystem management and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service—

Efficiency and rational planning approaches, traditionally valued by natural resource agencies, gave way to systems thinking, flexibility, adaptive management, and responsiveness.

Danter et al. (2000) analyzed the organizational changes desired by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to implement an "ecosystem management" approach to natural resource management during the 1994–1998 period. From their organizational assessment, Danter et al. (2000) observed that adopting ecosystem management required a number of significant organizational changes within the USFWS including (1) changes in professional emphasis, (2) changes in the level of interdisciplinary collaboration needed, (3) changes in the role and style of agency decisionmaking, and (4) changes in organizational values and culture. Efficiency and rational planning approaches, traditionally valued by many natural resource agencies, had to give way to systems thinking, flexibility, adaptive management, and responsiveness—a tall order in any large bureaucratic agency.

Danter et al. (2000) also identified a number of organizational barriers to adopting an ecosystem management approach agencywide. The bureaucratic structure of resource management agencies tends to resist change and new information. More specifically, organizational resistance to change occurred as traditional natural resource management fields made room to include emerging disciplines such as conservation biology and applied ecology. Further, a growing emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration challenged traditional organizational norms that tended to compartmentalize information along strictly disciplinary lines. An emerging emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration involved a fundamental shift in agency culture, power relationships, and professional norms. In interviews with USFWS employees and external stakeholders, Danter et al. (2000) also found that many USFWS personnel were confused about the ecosystem management approach. Lack of clarity about its definition and lack of personal involvement in change processes led to unfavorable opinions about the ecosystem management approach.

Faced with these protracted agency barriers and recognizing that the ecosystem management directive had only partially been institutionalized, the USFWS contracted with Danter et al. (2000) to conduct a formative organizational assessment of the status of ecosystem management implementation and what actions were needed to accelerate full implementation. The consulting team found that many of the organizational change factors identified in table 1 had not been accomplished. A sense of urgency had not been established because the reason for adopting ecosystem management had not been clearly articulated to employees. Efforts to form a powerful guiding coalition had been held back owing to the fact that not all USFWS Directorate members supported the ecosystem management directive. Not unexpectedly, the consulting team found that a clearly articulated vision had not been established and communicated widely across the agency. As mentioned above, many employees were confused and uncomfortable with the lack of direction and communication needed to empower personnel to act on the ecosystem vision and to create the short-term wins necessary to fully institutionalize the ecosystem management approach.

Based on results from the organizational assessment, the directorate took a number of concrete steps to accelerate the agency transition to ecosystem management. That included developing and sharing agencywide a new vision statement. The directorate also committed to holding all levels of leadership accountable for communicating the action plan to fully implement the ecosystem management approach. In addition, the directorate committed to provide the necessary training, development, and rotational assignments to ensure that the ecosystem management approach was fully implemented. From a research and monitoring perspective, it would be interesting and strategic to conduct a followup organizational assessment to understand the contemporary dynamics of how the ecosystem management approach is currently being integrated into USFWS operations.

The context for examining organizational change and sustainable recreation in the Forest Service is embedded in the challenges and opportunities that federal land management agencies face in enhancing recreation opportunities.

Case #2: Sustainable recreation and the U.S. Forest Service—
Our second organizational change case study comes from the Forest Service and its agencywide efforts to integrate sustainable recreation into the NFS. Although no study has specifically addressed the organizational changes necessary to implement sustainable recreation in the Forest Service, many of these organizational change dynamics can be evidenced through the empirical and professional literature on sustainable recreation (Collins and Brown 2007; Selin 2017, 2018). The context for examining organizational change and sustainable recreation in the Forest Service is embedded in the challenges and opportunities that federal land management agencies like the Forest Service face in enhancing recreation opportunities. For example, the number of recreation visits to our 154 national forests has grown from about 5 million visits in 1925 to 149 million visits today (USDA FS 2017). Population growth and increased urbanization has severely tested the Forest Service's recreation infrastructure and dedicated workforce (Collins and Brown 2007).

The challenges of responding to these external pressures on service delivery has been complicated by the reality of fiscal scarcity. Agency recreation budgets have been flat, or declining. For example, wildfire-related investments have captured over half of the Forest Service budget (USDA FS 2015). According to one recent Forest Service report, the Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness Program budget has declined by nearly $95 million between fiscal years 2011 and 2016, an 18 percent decrease (USDA FS 2017). According to this same report, the number of full-time employees in the Forest Service's managed recreation program has declined by nearly 30 percent since 2002.

These challenging social and economic forces have provided considerable urgency to agency efforts to implement more sustainable approaches to managing outdoor recreation on public lands. In the Forest Service, this sense of urgency was formalized in 2010 with the systemwide release of the Framework for Sustainable Recreation (FSR) (USDA FS 2010). The FSR communicated the broad challenges and opportunities facing the Forest Service's managed recreation program, a vision, guiding principles, goals, and recreation focus areas. Recreation focus areas included priorities such as restoring and adapting recreation settings, implementing "green" operations, forging strategic partnerships, promoting citizen stewardship, developing a stable financial foundation, and developing the agency's recreation workforce.

Over the past 5 years, the Forest Service Washington office has developed an FSR Implementation Guide that provides guidance, tools, and lessons learned to Forest Service regions and individual national forests. In addition, a number of Forest Service regions have developed their own sustainable recreation strategies, tiered to the national FSR, and individual forests are now striving to implement their own sustainable recreation action plans as well (Selin 2017). Enhancing recreation opportunities, improving public access, and sustaining recreation infrastructure were recently identified in five agency priorities published by the Forest Service (USDA FS 2017). Implementing the FSR across the agency can be viewed as a significant organizational change initiative that would benefit from adhering to the organizational change factors identified above.

Clearly, implementing sustainable recreation throughout the NFS presents significant organizational challenges and barriers that have not been adequately analyzed or reported (Selin 2018). Perhaps the greatest challenge is overcoming the limited financial, human resource, and technical capacity that the Forest Service managed recreation program brings to this agency's sustainable recreation objective. One agency report concluded that the FSR has not been fully implemented owing to the lack of a focused financial investment (USDA FS 2017). Other internal barriers to implementing the FSR include cultural factors such as elevating the status of the managed recreation program to be equal to such other resource management objectives as ecological restoration, wildlife management, and silviculture. Finally, agency leaders at all levels must be held accountable to support the hiring, training, and financial investments needed to fully implement sustainable recreation (Selin 2018).

More deliberate organizational assessment is needed to prescribe effective strategies to fully implement sustainable recreation across the NFS. This type of assessment would benefit the Forest Service and other public land agencies striving to implement sustainable recreation on public lands.

Compelling Questions

Integrating sustainability science and best practices into public-sector organizations will be challenging. The organizational change literature suggests several compelling research questions that should be explored further to advance organizational change theory and practice:

1. What is the current organizational status of implementing sustainable recreation across public land management agencies such as the Forest Service? Can a formative comprehensive organizational assessment help chart the way to accelerate organizational change initiatives?
2. How does ingrained organizational culture either advance or constrain organizational change initiatives like the Framework for Sustainable Recreation in the Forest Service?
3. What key characteristics of organizational leadership influence the direction of sustainable recreation change initiatives?

4. What type of incentives can be offered to employees to foster desired sustainable recreation change objectives?
5. How does a clear, compelling vision for change translate into building internal and external support for sustainable recreation change initiatives?
6. What lessons can be learned from current sustainable recreation change initiatives that can be translated into organizational change best practices?
7. How can the monitoring of sustainable recreation change initiatives identify those internal and external factors that either tend to constrain or foster organizational change?

Conclusions

Applied social science research can inform decisionmaking through ongoing monitoring of change initiative outcomes and consequences.

Public sector organizations are under societal pressure to adopt sustainability practices. Evidence from the organizational change literature suggests that there is considerable consensus around a set of organizational factors that tend to foster successful organizational change. There is also a need to better understand those organizational factors that tend to constrain successful organizational change. Applied social science research can inform decisionmaking through ongoing monitoring of change initiative outcomes and consequences. The sustainable recreation efforts of U.S. public land management agencies provide an opportunity to address agency needs while testing a specific model of organizational change. We believe that data-driven decisionmaking can build up a set of best practices to inform future organizational change initiatives.

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