

Article

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Scandal in the Response?

Canadian recipients of this letter needn't be told about the cascade of government "scandals" in recent years, cutting across departments and agencies, brought to light by the Auditor General. Critics have charged political interference, financial malfeasance, and ineptitude. These claims are outside my purview. But there are lessons to be learned through the prism of process failures.

One might ask- to what extent do public service leaders perceive their roles as managing processes? Whether it is running grant and contribution programs, operational units, policy development groups, or communications' agencies, is their focus exclusively on the content and issues, at the expense of process considerations about how the work is done? If so, the consequence can be little attention paid to activities associated with Continuous Process Improvement. Therefore, downsizing can result in gaps of service or inadequate controls. Work can frequently be done without predefined steps, causing inordinate time and costs to perform tasks. Internal and external "clients" can be ignored rather than being asked how well they are being served. Employees can lack process improvement skills and tools to "improve how they work". Finally, accountability for measuring and achieving results can remain an illusive and largely conceptual issue.

What should be learned from recent events? That other process challenges are lurking below the waterline.

North American manufacturers began to embrace Continuous Process Improvement, only when faced with a threat to their survival, posed by the quality of Japanese products and services. Decade's later, public service executives face a threat to their careers. Collectively, they would do well to reach a decision that they can no longer postpone a sweeping adoption of Continuous Process Improvement. If officials choose instead to hunker down with draconian financial rules to avoid future embarrassments, they will fail to avoid them. Moreover, they will fail to realize an opportunity to help employees truly remake the public service a process driven center of organizational excellence. The scandal could be in the response.

