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ACTION INSIGHTS

When Innovation Causes Conflict

Ostrich, Chameleon, and Dolphin Strategies in the Public Sector

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RESEARCH FINDINGS FOR CITY LEADERS

Public sector innovation often involves disputes over what is most important. All too frequently, these "value conflicts" can undermine or even derail the new policy, tool, program, or process you are seeking to implement. This **study** supported by the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative argues, however, that innovators can overcome such obstacles by paying at least as much attention to the design and management of the process of innovating as to the innovation itself.

What happens when a new idea is proposed in your organization? Does it trigger debate or cause conflict? Is it ignored or embraced? And if it's *your* idea that causes ripples, how do you handle the situation? Do you lean in and engage in the conversation or do you maneuver "under the radar"? What can you do to ensure broad support for your idea? *In short: how do you implement innovation in the face of different – or even conflicting – priorities, concerns, and interests?*

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Innovation and Conflict

Innovation is an inherently disruptive process: when you introduce something new, it typically replaces something old. Whether it's a new product, a new technology, a new working process, or a new organizational structure, the status quo is challenged merely by suggesting that there may be something different or "better." When that happens, we are forced to re-evaluate the old ways and assess the value of the new idea. This can lead to what we refer to as *value conflicts*, i.e., differences or disputes over what is most important.

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Take for example the hazard mitigation policy of "managed retreat." In order to save the lives and property of people in disaster-vulnerable areas, this approach preemptively relocates whole communities. In recent years, some localities have begun to consider or even pursue managed retreat, recognizing that it may be their only option for survival. Others, however, have flat-out rejected the policy because it uproots people from their homes, potentially weakening social cohesion, even as rising sea levels and worsening storms threaten their existence.

Value conflicts can also be found in another recent public innovation: technologically sophisticated contact tracing programs that aim to contain COVID-19 outbreaks. As effective and efficient as they promise to be, they also raise concerns about privacy, confidentiality, and security in countries that highly value individual liberties.

These are but just two recent examples of innovations involving value conflicts. In fact, it is highly likely that as an innovator you, too, will encounter competing interests and priorities as you seek to advance new ideas. So, what can you do when that happens?

The Framework: Ostriches, Chameleons, and Dolphins

In our study "Managing Value Conflicts in Public Innovation: Ostrich, Chameleon, and Dolphin Strategies" we explore the ways in which individuals and organizations deal with difficult-to-resolve differences centered around competing or contradictory values. Based on a review of the literature and two in-depth case-studies, we provide a framework for understanding a range of approaches to navigating these conflicts. (See The Ostrich/Chameleon/Dolphin Framework on page 4).

At one end of the spectrum is the ***avoidance* or *ostrich* strategy** (ostriches bury their heads in the sand), focused on hiding or denying conflicts. Organizations often employ this strategy for low-intensity disputes – but also when they feel they are simply unable to manage the conflict. In the middle of the spectrum lie several ***coping* or *chameleon* strategie**s (chameleons take on the color of their surroundings) with varying degrees of openness to conflict (usually to the extent necessary to advance the innovation). This type of approach is common when conflict is unavoidable and the willingness to engage is low. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the ***learning* or *dolphin* strategy** (dolphins explore and collaborate), an open process that embraces the exploration of differences and engages multiple perspectives. This approach can take one of two forms: reconciling, i.e., addressing the conflict by revising the innovation as it is developed; or deliberation, which features inclusive discussion. Although the strategy's engagement and learning processes can be quite intensive and time consuming, they are useful for organizations dedicated to finding common ground and forming consensus.

Illustrating the Framework: Two Case Studies in Public-Sector Innovation

Drawing on our familiarity with public sector innovation in the Netherlands, we applied this framework to two different technological innovations spearheaded by Dutch officials. One case focuses on the development of a national electronic ID system; the other on the creation of a national youth-at-risk index. Although each contains particularities unique to Dutch culture and systems of government, many aspects of the cases are universally applicable and align with global government innovation trends as identified by the OECD, including: (1) building digital identity; (2) embracing systems approaches and creating/leveraging enabling conditions; and (3) fostering inclusiveness and supporting vulnerable populations.[1]

Case Study 1: A Good ID?

When the semi-autonomous Dutch Vehicle Inspection Authority (DVIA) proposed to digitize driver's license signatures as a pilot for a national electronic ID system, value conflicts quickly emerged on several fronts. Some stakeholders prioritized efficiency of the new system. Others were more focused on privacy and security considerations. Still others worried about fairness to citizens without a driver's license. In response to the competing interests, the DVIA initially adopted an avoidance strategy, characteristic of the ostrich, in the hopes that those emphasizing privacy and fairness would back off. That strategy backfired, however, and the project stalled. The agency then leapt to the opposite end of the spectrum, taking a learning approach (i.e., the dolphin strategy) that involved extensive deliberation with a variety of stakeholders. The moment had passed, however, and the project continued to languish. More than 10 years later, at the time our article was published, the Netherlands still did not have a national e-ID.

This case reveals the dangers and limitations of both the ostrich and dolphin strategies. The initial avoidance, or ostrich, approach failed because it denied the existence of value conflicts; the subsequent learning, or dolphin, approach failed because it came too late and took too long.

[1] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, "Embracing Innovation in Government: Global Trends 2018" (Paris, France: OECD, 2018).

Case Study 2: Youth at Risk

Another instructive case from the Netherlands centers around the country's efforts to develop a national youth-at-risk index. The system's well-intentioned creators envisioned and championed it as a tool to help agencies share information and coordinate care to vulnerable clients. Yet major value conflicts developed around this innovation as well. After some iterations, the design of the system would have enabled racial profiling and information sharing for law enforcement purposes. Having remained focused on the benefits and efficiencies that the tool offered, the innovators had failed to consider the privacy risks and worries about project scope. By ignoring these valid but complicating concerns, they initially chose to avoid any conflict. Like their counterparts behind the e-ID, they had defaulted to the ostrich approach. In this case, however, strong objections raised by the national Data Protection Authority over the inadequate privacy protections motivated them to change course. In response to the agency's concerns, the innovation team pivoted to a coping (i.e., chameleon) strategy, partially adjusting system design and governance while also allowing community-based piloting to help advance the innovation.

As with the e-ID case, this example illustrates the pitfalls associated with avoidance. Yet it also shows us how innovators can succeed by making the partial adjustments typical of a coping, or chameleon, approach.

Applying the Framework in Your Work

Ideally, an innovation is an improvement over the old way of doing things. However, as the two cases from the Netherlands reveal, having a good idea is only half the battle. In order to navigate and mitigate value conflicts, you also need a strategy for how to introduce and implement your innovation, as well as how to make it sustainable. **Anticipating the innovation's effect on others** and considering stakeholders' concerns **can help craft the appropriate approach** to managing the conflicting interests and priorities that surround it.

If you are not aware of any value conflicts at all, it might be a good idea to test for blind spots and bias.

Our Ostrich-Chameleon-Dolphin framework offers three distinct ways to manage value conflicts: avoidance, coping, and learning. Although it is hard to imagine that burying your head in the sand is a good idea – ever – it does happen, so it is important to be able to recognize it and think about alternative strategies. In fact, the framework encourages adaptation and flexibility in a variety of instances. For instance, you may have to use different strategies at different stages of the innovation process. If, despite the attractiveness of inclusive deliberation, the learning strategy fails to generate consensus and threatens to take too much time (as occurred in the e-ID case), a coping strategy may be a more pragmatic alternative (as the developers of the youth-at-risk index discovered). Or, if you are not aware of any value conflicts at all, it might be a good idea to test for blind spots and bias by engaging others in a learning strategy to identify values or concerns you may have overlooked.

If you pay as much attention to the process of innovation as to the innovation itself, and determine the appropriate strategy to manage it, you are more likely to succeed.

Applying the Ostrich-Chameleon-Dolphin framework to real world cases can help you understand and better manage the social, political, and organizational dynamics of an innovation process. Innovators are sometimes preoccupied with the innovation itself and overlook or ignore overt or covert resistance to their ideas. This can result in a lack of support and therefore a failed innovation. If you pay as much attention to the **process of innovation** as to the innovation itself, and determine the appropriate strategy to manage it, you are more likely to succeed.

The Ostrich/Chameleon/Dolphin Framework:

Strategies for Managing Value Conflicts

STRATEGY TYPE		
OSTRICH (AVOIDANCE)	**CHAMELEON (COPING)**	**DOLPHIN (LEARNING)**
DEGREE OF OPENNESS TO CONFLICT		
Low	**Medium**	**High**
DESCRIPTION		
Focuses on hiding or denying conflicts.	A range of approaches with varying degrees of openness to conflict (usually to the extent necessary to advance the innovation).	Embraces the exploration of differences to find common ground, through either: · ***reconciling***, i.e., addressing the conflict by revising the innovation · ***deliberation***, i.e., inclusive discussion.
PURPOSE		
For low-intensity disputes – but also when a conflict seems especially difficult to manage	When conflict is unavoidable and the willingness to engage is low.	For organizations dedicated to finding common ground and forming consensus.
CASE EXAMPLES		
Case 1: The **Dutch Vehicle Inspection Authority** initially ignored differences over its e-ID, prioritizing the efficiencies of the new technology over privacy and fairness concerns. This avoidance approach failed to advance the innovation. **Case 2:** By initially focusing almost exclusively on the benefits of their tool, developers of the **Dutch Youth-at-Risk Index** avoided privacy concerns as well as issues related to project scope. The avoidance approach also failed in this instance.	**Case 2:** In response to concerns raised by the Data Protection Authority, the designers of the **Youth-at-Risk Index** made several partial adjustments to their tool. This coping approach ultimately allowed the innovation to advance.	**Case 1:** The **Dutch Vehicle Inspection Authority** eventually adopted a deliberative strategy that featured input from many stakeholders to try and address value conflicts over its e-ID. This lengthy and exhaustive learning approach failed to advance the innovation.

ACTION INSIGHTS

Action Insights summarize findings from academic research. They offer management and leadership guidance you can put to use in your work, and they link to the underlying studies.

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