

Inside Collaborative Networks: Ten Lessons for Public Managers

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This paper offers practical insights for public managers as they work within interorganizational networks. It is based on the author's empirical study of 14 networks involving federal, state, and local government managers working with nongovernmental organizations. The findings suggest that networks are hardly crowding out the role of public agencies; though they are limited in their decision scope, they can add collaborative public value when approaching nettlesome policy and program problems.

It is time to go beyond heralding the importance of networks as a form of collaborative public management and look inside their operations. At this point in the development of the field, it is well known (1) that “the age of the network” has arrived (Lipnack and Stamps 1994), (2) that hierarchy and markets are being supplemented by networks (Powell 1990), (3) that public managers are enmeshed in a series of collaborative horizontal and vertical networks (Agranoff and McGuire 2003), and (4) that networks need to be treated seriously in public administration (O'Toole 1997). If this form of organizing is so important to public managers, why not study it in the same sense that hierarchical organization or human resources or the budget process is examined? That is what this article addresses, taking a deeper look into how public networks are organized and how they are managed. It offers some empirically based experiences, addressing 10 important features of collaborative management.

The issues raised here are based on a study of the operations of 14 public management networks in the central states, comprising federal, state, regional, and local government officials and nongovernmental managers—that is, officers from nonprofits, for-profits, universities, and other organizations (Agranoff, forthcoming). Such networks can be chartered (organized by some formal mechanism as an intergovernmental agreement or by statutory action) or nonchartered (informal in legal status but equally permanent, organized, and mission oriented). These networks

are interorganizational (Alter and Hage 1998) and should be distinguished from social networks, which involve “studied nodes linked by social relationships” (Laumann, Galaskiewicz, and Marsden 1978) or recurring relationships (Nohria 1992), both within and outside organizations, for which there is an already developed rich tradition (Burt 1992; Granovetter 1973; White 1992). Public management networks are, in every sense, collaborative connections like social networks, although they not only comprise representatives of disparate organizations but also go beyond analytical modes. They are real-world public entities.

The frequently used term *network* (broadcast, supply service, professional, friendship) needs to be further defined. A term is required that fits the activity of cooperation or mutual action without being so broad that it encompasses every human connection. *Cooperation* refers to the act of working jointly with others, usually to resolve a problem or find a corner of activity. It can be occasional or regular, and it can occur within, between, or outside formal organizations. Here the interest is focused on the activities of individuals who represent organizations working across their boundaries. Agranoff and McGuire define such collaborative management processes as “the process of facilitating and operating in multi organizational arrangements to solve problems that cannot be solved, or solved easily, by single organizations” (2003, 4). In other words, the focus of public management networks goes beyond studies of informal and intraorganizational networking among individuals to include interorganizational—in this case, intergovernmental—entities that emerge from interactions among formal organizations. These bodies, according to the literature, tackle the most nettlesome of public problems (O'Toole 1997) and “connect public policies with their strategic and institutionalized context” (Kickert, Klijn and Koppenjan 1997, 1).

Ten practical suggestions emanating from a larger study of public management networks are offered

here. Readers who wish to gain deeper insights into the workings of such networks will have to go beyond the limited pages of this overview. The issues are empirically derived from a grounded theory methodology (Strauss and Corbin 1998). In other words, it is an inductive study in which the theoretical findings emanate from field-based data. Thus, the methodology places heavy emphasis on the responses of the public managers themselves. Extended discussions were undertaken in the field on two separate occasions with more than 150 public officials, in addition to field observation and examination of network documentation. In essence, the managerial lessons that follow come from the managers themselves. Hopefully, these insights will not only contribute to the collaborative management literature but also will be of use to those who practice this form of management.

Lesson 1: The network is not the only vehicle of collaborative management. *Networking* is a buzzword around public organizations these days that signifies social networking, within-organization lateral relationships, and a host of other collaborative endeavors. When it comes to cross-organization contacts, the managers in the study related that work within the network represents just one of several collaborative contacts.

Foremost among these contacts are informal bilateral linkages with representatives of other organizations. These used to be face-to-face and telephone contacts, but now e-mail allows for nonsimultaneous contact. Managers continue to spend a lot of effort on one-on-one relationships with those in other organizations. In addition, one must remember that many local governments, nonprofits, and for-profits are bilaterally linked with state and federal agencies through grants, contracts, or cooperative agreements. In some cases, these collaborative efforts are multilateral, involving three or more entities. There are also interagency agreements among organizations within the same government. These can be either bilateral or multilateral. At the interlocal level, there are a host of mutual service, compact, assumption of service, and other arrangements that will be familiar to those who study local governments (Walker 2000).

This is not to say that networks are unimportant vehicles of collaboration. They bring many organizations to the table. They are, as we will see, important vehicles for resource pooling, mutual exploration, and knowledge creation. Most importantly, networks open up new possibilities that would be hard for one, two, or even three organizations working together to achieve. But they are not the be-all and end-all of collaborative management. They share a place—in many cases, a small place—alongside literally thousands of interagency agreements, grants, contracts, and even informal contacts that involve issues such as

seeking information or some form of program adjustment (Agranoff and McGuire 2003).

Lesson 2: Managers continue to do the bulk of their work within the hierarchy. A familiar refrain is that networks are replacing hierarchies (Castells 1996; Koppenjan and Klijn 2004). Although it is certainly true that mutual dependency is leading to an increasing number of horizontal relationships crossing many boundaries, lateral connections seem to overlay the hierarchy rather than act as a replacement for them. According to the managers in the study, there is a premium on the ability to understand and function across boundaries, but this skill has not necessarily replaced the need for internal skills.

When asked, most managers said that they spent most of their time working within the hierarchy. There seemed to be a sort of consensus that only 15 percent to 20 percent of their total work time was consumed by all forms of collaborative activity, including their participation in networks. The typical public management network meets as a body monthly or quarterly, and focused project or workgroup efforts usually involve no more than five to seven hours per month. The managers reported that the rest of their time was filled with various nonnetwork (e.g., bilateral) collaboration. “Most of my work is still in planning, budgeting and human resources, like my other counterparts in —,” said one agency head. Another said, “In my agency I am the orchestra leader, dealing with all of the tasks of a public agency. In —, I am just one player, and a part-time one at that.”

This does not include the growing number of boundary spanners or program specialists who are involved in networks and thus spend somewhat more time on collaboration. Program specialists frequently (and more naturally) work across agency boundaries. Their work is technical or based on specialized knowledge, and it is geared to solving problems, belonging to epistemic communities, and acting on shared beliefs. For example, developmental disabilities professionals inside and outside government in one public management network reported spending considerably more time solving overlapping problems with clients, services, and funding. “We have worked together so long and so much that now we finish one another’s sentences,” explained one longtime advocacy association specialist. Professionals working on problems seem to form these epistemic communities naturally and reach across boundaries for routine as well as program interagency accommodation (Thomas 2003), and thus they spend more time in collaboration.

The same held true for the few administrators in the study who were full-time boundary spanners. For example, one administrator in the Nebraska State Game and Fish Commission related that his entire

job involved acting as a liaison with environmental agencies and bodies, along with those dealing with rural development. Another federal official with the Economic Development Administration was the sole staff person for two midwestern states. He spent most of his time in the field working with local governments or economic development groups, along with collaborative efforts with other federal and state agencies.

For the line administrator, however, it is largely business as usual most of the time, dealing with internal POSDCORB matters, along with increasing collaborative pressures. Of course, as external connections increase, there will be more internal work related to outside-agency contacts.

Lesson 3: Network involvement brings several advantages that keep busy administrators involved. One clear observation is that sustained collaborative activity, such as that of ongoing networks, must demonstrate worth or busy managers will not waste their time on participation. The networks in this study were not all without stability threats, but all had been ongoing for a considerable period of time. The oldest, an Ohio-based public management network that assisted small communities with their water-supply and wastewater problems, dated back to the late 1980s. This was no easy accomplishment, inasmuch as this network was nonchartered. Why do bodies such as these persist? Because they deliver different forms of public value to their multiple participants.

Performance counts in collaborative activity. But the type of result is not completely tied to making the type of policy adjustments mentioned at the beginning of this article. Actually, networks can perform a great many public service purposes. They not only bring many parties to the table but also have the potential to expand the resource base. The most important element of the resource base is the potential for knowledge expansion, a function that administrators said was indispensable. From knowledge comes the possibility of new solutions derived by, owned, and implemented by several parties. Finally, many managers related that a great deal of one-to-one networking went on in and around network activities, “reducing telephone and e-mail tag,” as the saying goes.

The key to sustained network involvement is performance, and the key to performance is adding public value (Moore 1995) by working together rather than separately (Bardach 1998, 8). In the 14 public management networks studied, four types of public value were queried, and managers found substantial benefits in each dimension. The first benefit is the value added to the manager or professional, such as

learning new ways to collaborate, intergovernmental skills, and how to network, along with enhanced technical and information and communications technology skills. Second are the benefits accruing to the home agency, such as access to other agencies’ information, programs and resources; access to information and communications technology; cross-training of agency staff; and most important, enhanced external input into the internal knowledge base. Third are the collective process skills that accrue from working together over a sustained period of time—for example, developing interagency planning, piloting an adaptation of a new technology, developing a mutual interagency culture that leads to subsequent problem solving, and experimenting with electronic group decision technology. Fourth are the concrete results accrued, such as an action plan, a capability building conference, new interagency strategies, and multi-agency policy and program changes. These types of value-adding performance results sustain administrators’ efforts in collaborative undertakings.

Lesson 4: Networks are different from organizations but not completely different. When managers become involved in these emergent collectives, they find an interesting mixture of old and new practices. Yes, networks are different in the sense that they are non-hierarchical, players at the table begin largely equal as organizational representatives, most actions are discussed and decided by consensus, resources are multi-sourced, and there are relatively few sanctions for withdrawal. But networks are not different in the sense that they require some form of organization, operating rules, routines, and so on. Most have stated missions, goals, and objectives to frame their type of organization, which, in many ways, look more like the structures of nonprofit organizations than those of large bureaucracies.

Virtually all of the 14 networks studied operated with some form of council or board, elected by the entire body of agency representatives, very much like the board of directors of a nonprofit organization. Normally, the various sectors (federal, state, nonprofit, for-profit) or identified interests (universities, regional agencies) have a seat at the table, but these bodies rarely do the work beyond strategic planning and final approval of projects and efforts. The real work in all of the networks studied was done in either standing committees (e.g., finance, technology transfer, telemedicine, educational applications, transportation technical review) or focused and usually shorter-term workgroups (e.g., ortho-infrared mapping, bicycle and pedestrian, broadband usage, community visitation, water and wastewater treatment). Such bodies, of course, resemble the standing committees and task forces of nonprofits in that their participation is voluntary, they reach out to expertise inside and outside the network wherever it can be found, and they

generally try to reach agreement on technical merits and possibilities without hierarchical involvement.

There is thus much less difference between organizations and networks than initially appears, particularly when one accounts for the fact that hierarchical organizations themselves are changing. It is an accepted fact that bureaucratic structures have become more flexible and permeable over the past century (Clegg 1990, 181). Today's organizations are becoming more *conductive*—that is, they are continuously generating and renewing capabilities, bearing in mind the alignment between internal forces and external demands, including the importance of creating partnerships through internal–external interaction, building alliances and coalitions, forming and reforming teams across functions and organization boundaries, and collaborating to actively manage interdependencies (Saint-Onge and Armstrong 2004, 191). In this sense, perhaps bureaucracies and standing networks appear a good deal alike because both need to be concerned with managing complex partnerships, with blurring boundaries. The difference is that one structures and creates rules and strategies under the umbrella of one organization, whereas the other must interorganizationally and collectively create structures, rules, and strategies that fit their multiorganizational needs.

Lesson 5: Not all networks make the types of policy and program adjustments ascribed to them in the literature. There are many public value benefits of collaboration, and not all of them fall neatly into the “solving nettlesome interagency problems” domain. When asked how they were able to forge agreement and arrive at a mutually beneficial course of action, managers from a number of networks related that they did not really engage in that type of activity. Subsequent investigation revealed that actually there were four different types of networks among the 14.

Three networks proved to be *informational*, wherein partners came together almost exclusively to exchange agency policies and programs, technologies, and potential solutions. Any changes or actions were voluntarily taken up by the agencies themselves. Another four networks were *developmental*, wherein partner information and technical exchange were combined with education and member services that increased the members' capacities to implement solutions within their home agencies and organizations. Another three networks were identified as *outreach*, wherein the activities of the developmental network were engaged; in addition, however, they also blue-printed strategies for program and policy change that led to an exchange or coordination of resources, although decision making and implementation were

ultimately left to the agencies and programs themselves. Finally, four networks were *action* networks, wherein partners came together to make interagency adjustments, formally adopt collaborative courses of action, and deliver services, along with information exchanges and enhanced technology capability.

The fact that informational and developmental networks do not become directly involved in program and policy adjustments does not make them any less public management networks. The study of collaborative management is relatively recent, and no public sector interagency body should be bound by preconceived or deductive research frameworks or definitions. They are every bit collaborative, public-serving bodies. Moreover, their actions often indirectly lead to subsequent strategies, adjustments, programs and policies. Indeed, there may well be more types of networks and collaborative structures—equally successful—waiting to be discovered. Like other aspects of collaboration, the typology suggests that networks must be analyzed with an open mind.

Lesson 6: Collaborative decisions or agreements are the products of a particular type of mutual learning and adjustment. Despite a form of organization that resembles a nonprofit organization, networks rarely follow parliamentary procedure. First, because all networks do not really make decisions, it is preferable to refer to many of their deliberative processes as “reaching agreements” rather than “decisions,” as the latter normally connotes the action of implementation. In collaborative bodies, decisions and agreements are necessarily based on consensus, inasmuch as participating administrators and professionals are *partners*, not superior–subordinates. As such, they are co-conveners,

co-strategists, co-action formulators, co-programmers, and so on. It is also true that public agency administrators possess neither ultimate legal authority (except, of course, within one's home agency domain) nor control over all technical information. Authority in the network is shared with the many stakeholders at the table: other administrators, program specialists, research scientists, policy researchers, and interest group and advocacy association officials. Among the partners, it is unlikely that any single agency or representative at the table will have the legal authority or financial resources to completely approach a problem. Finally, the all-important potential for agency-based implementation for most collaborative solutions lies not in the network itself or in any one agency or program but among the many.

Collaborative decision making and agreement are no doubt similar to the functions of knowledge-seeking

workgroups within single organizations (Newell et al. 2002). Consensus prevails over motions and voting. For example, one study participant related, “We have Robert’s rules in our by-laws, but only use them after we have reached agreement.” Another network chair said, “Parliamentary procedure rules won’t work—as a last resort when we are near consensus we may resort to informal Robert’s rules to move things along.” The learning process is clearly and directly a parallel component of network decisions. “Once we agree that a problem is an issue we care to look into, we study it and discuss the results before any action is taken,” reported one participant. “We try to get on the same technical page if we possibly can. That means someone or a work group has to study a problem, then we discuss it,” said another. “Our Technology Transfer Committee is charged with finding feasible small town water solutions used elsewhere; they then become the basis of Steering Committee discussions.” Finally, one manager interviewed commented, “The Transportation Technical Committee is charged not only with looking at the feasibility of projects, but to advance state-of-the-art [transportation] programming to the Policy Committee agenda.” These comments from the discussants highlight the centrality of making the network a learning entity in the sense of Senge’s (1990) learning organization. One can then characterize the typical network decision-making process as involving joint learning that leads to brokered consensus.

Most importantly, this process is oriented toward creating a collective power of new possibilities. In a confusing, complicated world in which institutional arrangements are loosely arranged, “The issue is to bring about enough cooperation among disparate community elements to get things done” (Stone et al. 1999, 354). In order to open up new possibilities, the networks studied used six distinct predecision or agreement learning strategies. They prepared for brokered consensus through (1) group discussion or exchange of ideas; (2) political negotiation of sensitive concerns and intensely felt needs; (3) direct application of technology or preestablished decision rules or formats; (4) application of preestablished, formulaic procedures (e.g., those related to regulations, grants, or loans); (5) data-driven decisions or agreements (e.g., market studies, usage patterns, traffic or accident counts); and (6) predecision simulation or electronic base groupware or other decision techniques. The informational and developmental networks tended to be involved in the first two categories exclusively—discussion and exchange and political negotiation—whereas the outreach and action networks engaged many of the six. In all, public management networks probably do not make decisions all that differently from the internal processes of learning organizations, but organizational boundaries must be acknowledged through what one could characterize as partner respect or nonhierarchical behavior.

Lesson 7: The most distinctive collaborative activity of all of the networks proved to be their work in public sector knowledge management. In our contemporary information-based society, work is increasingly knowledge based, but substantial gaps in knowledge led each public management network to seek more and, in the process, somehow manage this commodity. “Knowledge is a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information” (Davenport and Prusak 2000, 5). Whereas *data* refer to discrete, objective facts, and *information* is a message in the form of a document or an audible or visual communication, *knowledge* is more action oriented, both in process and in outcome. Knowledge management has two dimensions: *explicit knowledge*, which can be codified and communicated easily in words, numbers, charts, or drawings, and *tacit knowledge*, which is embedded in the senses, individual perceptions, physical experiences, intuition, and rules of thumb (Saint-Onge and Armstrong 2004). Knowledge management is the process of bringing together explicit and tacit knowledge and displaying and manifesting it, “as it involves skilled performance, i.e., KM [knowledge management] praxis is ‘punctuated through social interaction’” (Tsoukas 2005, 158–59).

In the networks studied, the process of knowledge management in many ways defined the major focus of their standing committees and working groups. First, essentially all of them began by surveying the universe of data and information that their partners had developed or could access, plus external databases of use to them. Second, this information then used to develop their “own source” explicit knowledge using resources such as libraries, map inventories, strategic plans, fact sheets and policy guides, focused studies, surveys, conferences and workshops, electronic bulletin boards, process reviews, long-range plans, models and simulations, and market studies. Third, tacit knowledge was rarely formally codified, but it was regularly approached through stakeholder consultations, best practices booklets, workgroups as “communities of practice,” study project report panels, expert presentations, specialized workshops, SWOT workshops, hands-on technical assistance, community leadership development sessions, forums on “what works,” direct agency outreach, help desks, and public hearings. Fourth, the networks tried to organize the explicit/tacit interface not through codification but through informal feedback on the myriad of knowledge management activities in which they engaged, usually through some informal post-project assessment or at its board or steering committee meetings. Fifth, most of the networks directly served some of the knowledge management needs of their partner agencies by producing formal reports, responding to data requests, supplying modeling and planning data, circulating

policy reports, sponsoring in-agency forums and report sessions, providing technical expert linkages between the network and specific agencies, and in some cases, providing agency-requested studies.

All of these knowledge management activities are now supported by the use of information and communications technology, such as e-mail, teleconferencing, Web-based geographic information systems, decision-support software, and the like. These are essential for partners that are situated in disparate organizational locations, although they are no substitute for face-to-face communication, the normal mode of detailed knowledge management work. In the same way that organizations seek structured predictability, networks try to use their open-ended processes of coordinating purposeful individuals who can apply their unique skills and experiences to the local problem confronting the collaborative undertaking (Tsoukas 2005, 111). They are part of the distributed knowledge systems that are created across boundaries, possessing somewhat fewer constraints or rule-bound actions and approaching those problems beyond the scope of any one agency.

Lesson 8: Despite the cooperative spirit and aura of accommodation in collaborative efforts, networks are not without conflicts and power issues.

These concerns became quite evident when the networks' agreements and actions were broken down. Collaborative management, with its joint learning, consensus, and mutual accommodation orientation, may be assumed to be all hugs and kisses as the group sits in the "hot tub" of small groups, contemplates, becomes mellow, and somehow agrees. In fact, a number of the networks participants studied reported that many of their challenges related to conflicts among partners.

For example, the Darby Partnership, an informational watershed network in central Ohio, almost fell apart when some of its members supported a congressional bill to make the Darby Creek a national wildlife refuge. The wildlife refuge was so divisive that it impeded the partnership's efforts to exchange ideas about the environmental status and remediation efforts in the watershed. Likewise, the Iowa Geographic Information Council struggled for more than two years with the state of Iowa's chief information officer. The officer was unwilling to support the council's efforts to recruit a field technical officer to help local governments access the geographic information system. The Kentucky-Indiana Planning and Development Agency had to deal with major conflict over the siting of a

second bridge over the Ohio River into the city of Louisville. After years of conflict, two bridges were proposed (city/suburban), displacing many other local transportation improvements.

These "mega-conflicts," so to speak, illustrate the point that all is not harmony in collaboration. Numerous mini-conflicts occur over agency turf, the contribution of resources, staff time devoted to the network, the location of meetings and conferences, and most importantly, threats of withdrawal because of frustration over the time and effort expended to achieve results. These are the more or less hidden aspects or the other side of collaboration.

Also hidden is the issue of power within networks. Some look at policy networks as coequal, interdependent, patterned relationships (Klijn 1996). On the other hand, it appears that different actors can occupy different role positions and carry different weights, creating unequal opportunity contexts and filling "structural holes" (Burt 1992, 67), whereas others may be less willing or able players. Indeed, Clegg and Hardy conclude that "[We] cannot ignore the façade of 'trust' and the rhetoric of 'collaboration' used to promote vested interests through the manipulation and capitulation by weaker partners" (1996, 679). It is also possible that this type of "power over" exists alongside

the "power to," depicted earlier as the power of possibility. In fact, both are at work in networks and other collaborative enterprises. Indeed, both types proved to be the case in the 14 public management networks studied.

In fact, the two dimensions of power were manifest in a complex power structure found in each network. Beyond the formal structure of the governing body and working committees and

groups were four elements of power. First, virtually every network had a *champion* (and in two cases, two champions)—a visible, powerful, and prestigious public agency head or nonprofit chief executive officer who organizes or sustains the network. The presence of the champion in the network signaled to others in the field to "stay in" and "cooperate." Second, there was a *political core*, normally comprising the primary participating department heads or federal government state directors and chief executive officers of the non-governmental organizations. These managers tended to be part of the governance structure, they sent a message to other participants that the network was important to be involved with, and they were the people who were most likely to be involved in high-level interagency negotiations and resource accommodations. Third, there was a *technical core*, primarily

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workgroup or committee activists who knew the most about a particular topic (e.g., watershed management, planning, geographic information systems, finance, regulation, information and communications technology, and so on). Because a great deal of the work was bound up investigating problems, creating knowledge, and looking for feasible solutions, their work was at the core of network activity, and the most knowledgeable of these individuals held considerable operating power. Finally, there were paid staff who held the network together through their support efforts, which in the 14 networks ranged from one or two persons who devoted to the network full time to 18 full- or part-time participants in one action network. Because staff orchestrated all of the work—arrangements, negotiations, technical—they had a foot in every phase of the operations and, in their own way, hold considerable sway over network's work. This power structure is deep, and the four dimensions overlap in practice—it is every bit as real as those in the organizations from which representatives are drawn.

Lesson 9: Networks have their collaborative costs, as well as their benefits. If managers give up or add to the job of internal operations to engage in cooperation, they obviously do this at some cost. To most managers, the most primary costs are related to giving up agency authority or turf and giving up agency resources (Bardach 1998). Many line managers are said to be protective of agency autonomy for one of four reasons: (1) the agency manager knows best, and therefore should carry out its mission and programs; (2) loss of autonomy is associated with the loss of control and guidance of the agency; (3) people place a greater value on losses than on gains; and (4) autonomy reduces uncertainty (Thomas 2003, 33–34). In the study, these turf questions existed, but they were not foremost because most managers thought they had sufficient control over their own organizations and that the collaborative work of the network rarely cut into their core missions. Most managers felt they had ultimate policy control. Resource contributions were somewhat different. For the informational and developmental networks, the only resources contributed involved staff time and information, which normally come at a low or marginal cost. The other networks did have to yield resources for the cause, but when the partners could see their contribution to the larger issue or cause, they felt they could make such contributions. The only problematic issue occurred when resources were withheld.

There were, however, other real costs associated with network participation that the managers and professionals articulated. Six general cost categories were indicated: (1) time and opportunity costs lost to the home agency as a result of network involvement; (2) time and energy costs resulting from the protracted decision-making process, based on nonhierarchical,

multiorganizational, multicultural human relations processes; (3) agreements not reached because of the exertion of organizational power or the withholding of power; (4) network gravitation toward consensus-based, risk-averse decision agendas; (5) resource “hoarding,” or agencies’ failure or unwillingness to contribute needed resources; and (6) public policy barriers embedded in legislation, coupled with legislators’ or other policy makers’ unwillingness to make needed changes, which, in turn, frustrated collaborative decisions. All of these appear to thwart progress within networks.

In the literature, there has been less emphasis on the costs than on the benefits of collaborative efforts. Because the seven costs identified here (turf plus the six drawn from the study) do not nearly exhaust the list, more emphasis must be placed on this dimension. For public managers, they are as real as the benefits.

Lesson 10: Networks alter the boundaries of the state only in the most marginal ways; they do not appear to be replacing public bureaucracies in any way. Just as some assert that networks are replacing hierarchies, there are those who believe that collaborative structures such as networks are pushing out the traditional role of government to include a host of nongovernmental decision makers. Have the boundaries of government changed? Rhodes (1997) refers to the multiple influences of complex networks, among other forces, as differentiating the British polity. Loughlin’s (2000) analysis of European regionalism suggests that the transformation from a welfare state to a liberal state to a communitarian state has transformed government into an enabling state in which decentralized public–private partnerships, among other forces, are diminishing governments’ hold. Frederickson (1999) points to the increasing disarticulation of the state, where there is an increasing gap between jurisdiction and program management.

Most of the managers and other partners studied felt this to be true, but only to a limited extent. To a degree, the deliberations of the network and the involvement of nongovernmental organizations clearly influenced the courses of action taken by government, and in some cases, new programs and strategies emanated from network deliberations. But the partners were quick to point out three large caveats. First, when it comes to policy decisions, it is almost always the public institutions that make the ultimate call, and in the case of implementation, it is the agency. Second, in virtually every public management network, it is government administrators at federal, state, and local levels who are the core or among the core actors in the network. They are able to inject legislative, regulatory, and financial considerations right into the network mix, which hardly marginalizes them.

Third, many collaborative efforts outside the network form are more tightly controlled by the government, in the form of grant expectations, contract provisions, or loan conditions, tying the nongovernmental organization to the public agency in a tighter way. One might also add that for informational and developmental networks, there is hardly any governmental scope at issue, at least in any direct form. In fact, in most cases, even the outreach and action strategic networks worked on a rather narrow scope of issues—federal transportation funding, educational broadcast policies, rates for use of the state Web portal—or strategies that did not compel but assumed voluntary compliance, such as a small-town water upgrade or a value-added agricultural initiative. In all, networks have some impact on traditional government agency powers, but it is far too early to discuss closing them down.

Hirst (2000) cautions us that government retains essential powers over decision making and traditional normative and services domains. As Sharpe (1986) once suggested, government is not just another organization in the mix of interorganizational actors. The important issue appears to be taking the next research-oriented step to examine just how and how much network-generated complexity affects what we have traditionally known as *government*. Do complexes of networks extend public management processes outward to nongovernmental organizations? In the interim, the research reported here suggests that it is far too early for practicing managers to look for other work. Their “day jobs” appear safe.

Conclusion

These lessons represent a start in understanding how collaborative bodies such as networks work on the inside. Theoretically, the broader study is able to make several arguments that add fuel to the debate regarding networks. As suggested here, however much the “era of the network” is present, hierarchies persist to fulfill the legal and policy functions of government. It also demonstrates that not all public networks are alike; they are differentiated by what they do—or more precisely, by what powers they have. Many have few or no powers. An internal look at networks indicates that although they are largely self-organizing, they require structuring that reflects their knowledge-seeking orientation. They need to be managed like organizations but in collaborative, nonhierarchical ways. Indeed, the data–information–knowledge function of networks is so paramount that their collaborative communities of practice across agencies distinguish them from more bureaucratically oriented hierarchies. Although most public management networks lack formal power to make policy and program adjustments, they do make a difference in other ways. In particular, they add value through their

knowledge-enhancement functions, which, in the long run, bring beneficial outcomes to the participating managers and professionals, the partner agencies, the collaborative process, and to short- and long-term policy and program solutions. Finally, networks do change the way in which public managers work, inasmuch as their actions and behaviors are influenced by collaboration, but there are other means of collaborative management and real legal and regulatory limits to the amount of flexibility that most managers have within networks. In this sense, networks threaten or hollow the boundaries of the state in only the most subtle ways.

A research tradition on network operation is beginning to fill in some of the theoretical blanks—for example, the work of Provan and Milward (1991, 1995) on governance structure and outcomes, Mandell (1999) on management styles and instruments, Agranoff and McGuire (2003) on collaborative instruments, Bardach (1998) on theories of collaborative leadership, Koppenjan and Klijn (2004) on management knowledge to deal with uncertainty, McGuire (2000) on management styles, and O’Toole and Meier (2001) on managerial strategies and behaviors. In addition, Agranoff and McGuire (2001) have pulled together a number of core concepts in collaborative network management into a post-POSDCORB paradigm.

The lessons related here suggest that in some areas of study, there is more than meets the eye, but in many more, there is substantially less. In regard to the latter, networks are far from the only form of collaborative management, and they may be much less important than contractual or interagency and other cooperative agreements. Managers do spend more time in collaboration, at some cost, but less than one would think. Today’s wicked policy problems, dispersed knowledge and resources, first- and second-order effects, and intergovernmental overlays guarantee that managers must engage other governments and nongovernmental organizations (Agranoff and McGuire 2003; O’Toole 1997). The payoff is that public management networks have a lasting collaborative effect, as they build collective capacity for subsequent collaborative solutions and teach managers the essential skill of collaboration.

As observed earlier, it may be impossible to precisely weigh the benefits of networks against the costs, but the advantages must be there—busy administrators and program specialist partners would not engage in collaboration solely for social purposes or for the intrinsic merit of cooperation. There has to be something more in terms of holding participants in. It is hoped that these 10 lessons will be of use to managers who are engaging in or contemplating network collaborative public management.

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