

Strategic Management in Public Services Organizations: Concepts, schools and contemporary issues

By Ewan Ferlie and Edoardo Ongaro

Routledge, 2015

ISBN 978-0-415-85538-9

Ewan Ferlie and Edoardo Ongaro's book *'Strategic Management in Public Services Organisations – concepts, schools and contemporary issues'* is a timely and substantive contribution to the literature on public services management. Four decades of public management reform have produced significant transformative changes to the management and scope of the public sector, thereby raising the question whether public services organisations are more receptive to strategic planning - both in theory and practice. The authors argue that selective models of strategic management are now more relevant to the public sector and a recurrent theme throughout the book is attention to understanding under what conditions can public services organisations engage in strategic planning. The distinctiveness of public services organisations, while somewhat more contested, remains important given their democratic character and different national and cultural contexts.

The book is well structured and has nine substantive chapters which are logically sub-divided. This also enables (re)reading specific sections independently of one another as there are a number of specific themes under discussion, for example, cross references to strategy as process; protocols for the analysis of 'practices' in public management. The chapter sequence is composed of a literature review of the schools of thought in strategic management with key links made to the public management literature; the relevance of strategy to third sector organisations; strategy in public service organisations of different politico-administrative contexts; a focus on what difference strategy makes to performance; excellence and best practices research in public management. Chapter five makes a notable contribution as it acknowledges the reliance on the third sector for the delivery of public services, therefore justifying the need to pay attention to strategy and management of change processes in NGOs and the not for profit sector.

All chapters in the book pay considerable attention to the features and operation of the public sector while underlining the benefits of strategic direction. For example, chapter seven's consideration of the difference strategy makes to performance highlights how this may positively contribute to accountability, equity and neutrality as organisational attributes that express normative interpretations in the public sector. All chapters are comprehensively referenced which facilitates readers to dig deeper into the international literature, both theoretical and empirical perspectives.

Ferlie and Ongaro's work makes several contributions to the current scholarly literature on the contemporary management of public service organisations and three areas are focused on in this review. Firstly, the authors interrogate a wide array of concepts, models and commentary in the wide material available on strategic management and public management. Typically these contributions are discussed sepa-

rately but Ferlie and Ongaro effectively map the literature for the reader and assess its relevance for present-day organisational contexts in public administration. This is approached in two ways – chapter two sets out the main schools of strategic management which have developed since the 1960s, with due attention to the influence of the strategic positioning school, principally Porter's (1980, 2004) rationalistic approach, and Mintzberg's (1983; 2009) alternative emphasis on organisational learning which leads on to discussions of culture management.

Chapter three broadens the discussion to introduce the emergence of new disciplinary perspectives to strategic management. This covers offerings from the private sector based Resource-based View (RBV) to strategy in action through the role of the board, and more distinctive public sector contributions incorporating governance approaches, such as the Public Value School which emerged in the mid-1990s. Overall, it is no easy task to navigate the reader through this rather dense literature which has its own specific jargon and array of acronyms. Ferlie and Ongaro unpack the detail effectively and present the range of interpretations on strategic management in a well organised roadmap, whilst highlighting the connections of this literature with reviews of public sector organisations and the legacy of NPM reforms. The authors themselves are internationally recognised experts in the field and draw on their own research to animate their arguments and complement the empirical illustrations of public services management.

Secondly, the authors' clear message that context matters acknowledges the reality that public services organisations are embedded in specific politico-administrative and cultural milieu, both shaping their *modus operandi* and interactions with (cross-national) public, private, non-profit organisations. Ferlie and Ongaro acknowledge that despite the volume of material on public sector management, the literature does not pay sufficient attention to linking it with the significance of context. The notion of a 'one best way' and presentation of a general set of ingredients constituting the NPM recipe for reform is not convincing. More specifically, the authors argue that the complexity of context affects what they label as the 'strategic space' of public services organisation.

Chapter six addresses 'framing the context' with a comprehensive discussion of the frameworks utilised to scaffold national characteristics and different 'houses' of politico-administrative relations (notably paying attention to Peters and Painter's (2010) organisation of administrative traditions and Pollitt and Bouckaert's seminal treatment of the characteristics shaping/resisting public management reform). The authors sensibly argue that context requires careful consideration in any attempts to address strategic management challenges in public service organisations given that they are more exposed to national and administrative culture than the private sector. The chapter revisits discussions on NPM, NWS and networked governance in order to emphasise the transformative effects of administrative reform and address the links to strategic management which are not examined in detail by other authors. The key point being that organisational strategies evolve in different settings and the contextual influences can't be overlooked. The authors conclude the chapter by elaborating on the key conditions shaping strategy by examining the dimensions of autonomy, influences of strategic management thought, and political-societal expectations that evolve, combine and change over time in a public services organisation.

A third key contribution to note is the attention to international case studies and contributions from eminent scholars in the field. Generally speaking the inclusion of such case studies enriches the relevance of this advanced textbook for teachers and students of public management and comparative public administration. The range of theoretical approaches covered is challenging and therefore the balance struck in the book between the analysis of the academic literature and the applications presented in the case illustrations presents a good mix for the reader. The case studies are included in every chapter, support the chapters general focus, and cover a diversity of thematic settings that further stress the influence of context in public services management.

In conclusion, Ferlie and Ongaro succeed in convincing us that strategic management is a significant component in understanding the science, art and profession of contemporary public administration and its practice. They acknowledge that there is no one best way to apply strategy to the public sector and admirably present a theoretical framework as a gateway to further research. Graduate students and researchers alike will find this book a valuable repository of knowledge on the impact of strategic planning on performance in public services organisations, with the added value of the numerous international applications illustrated from empirical research.

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