THE CHALLENGE OF STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Strategic management of public organizations has been one of the "hottest" topics of the past decade both in academia and in public management practice (Bozeman, 1983; Bryson, 1989; Denhardt, 1983; Eadie and Steinbacher, 1985; Olsen and Eadie, 1982; Ring and Perry, 1985; Wechsler and Backoff, 1986). For the most part, the burgeoning strategic management literature has not been sufficiently attentive to the challenge of applying strategic management at specific levels of government. (For exceptions see, Bryson and Roering, 1988; Gargan, 1989; Halachmi, 1986; Swanstrom, 1986; Wechsler, 1989.)

There are good reasons however, to expect considerable variation across sectors, between levels of government, and among agencies (Allison, 1983; Bozeman, 1987; Fottler, 1982; Rainey *et al.*, 1976; Ring and Perry, 1985). If we are to be successful in transferring concepts developed in the private sector to public management, then it would be useful to examine the nature of expected variations and explore their implications for organizations and managers.

Although there is considerable merit in studying large populations of organizations along comparative dimensions, the authors have chosen an alternative, but equally useful, approach in which a more narrowly circumscribed organization type is examined intensively. In this article, the authors focus on the **agencies of general purpose local governments**. While this label captures a diverse set of agencies (including public works, police and fire, social services, etc.) with distinct policy and management agendas, the institutional and political context of local government is the driving strategic factor for entire populations of organizations.

In the following sections, the authors explore the challenge of strategic management in agencies of local government and highlight the importance of the institutional and operating environment. Specifically, they focus on external political dependency as a crucial factor affecting strategic management in local government agencies. They also give consideration to the range of strategies available to agencies for managing their political dependencies.

AGENCIES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

There is a wide variety of organizational types in the public sector, including executive branch agencies, legislative bodies, courts, independent commissions, and various public authorities. Executive branch agencies of local government, which are among the most numerous of organizational forms, are the principal units of analysis in this article.

The authors hypothesize that the strategic behavior of agencies of general purpose local government will be quite different from that of other public organizations, private sector firms, and not-for-profit agencies. They believe that these differences stem from the institutional setting and context of local governments and the constraints and dependencies which are imposed on the agencies as a consequence. By examining this setting, they can obtain significant insights into the strategic behavior of this large class of public sector organizations.

SETTING AND CONTEXT

A variety of factors influence the strategic behavior of local government agencies and establish the challenging conditions of strategic management in local government. In the presentation below, these factors are grouped into the following categories: (1) origins and legal bases of government and its agencies; (2) goals and services of the agencies; (3) governmental control processes; and (4) financing and resource allocation mechanisms.

Origins and Legal Bases. The general purpose local government is ultimately a creation of its citizens; citizens and the polity can be said to own the government and its sub-units. General purpose governments are established through the legal standing derived from a constitutional compact at the federal or state level. At the local level, governments derive their standing from state constitutions.

Local governments and their administrative agencies operate under a constitutional and statutory order prescribing both responsibilities and constraints. Operatign under these legal mandates, these governments have responsibility for a wide range ofservices. Given the authority provided by law, local governments are designed so as to minimize the possibiity of usurpation or abuse of authority.

Constitutional or charter designs significantly affect the strategic management of the agencies of general purpose local governments. In many local governments, for example, there is formal separation of powers among the chief executive of the jurisdisction, the legislature, the judiciary, and across and between levels of government. As a result of this design strategy, control over policy-making is not monocratic but fragmented (polycratic) and strategic management is often politicized by partisan actors. Additionally, local governmet jurisdictions are clearly dellineated in terms of territory. For the most part, jurisdictional boundaries are fixed and difficult to change. Even when there is the possibility of change, such as by annexation, merger or consolidation, boundaries of the jurisdiction are set by governing boards and not by the service delivery agencies of the executive branch.

Goals and Services. The role and purpose of any government is, in the most general sense, directed toward serving the public and its welfare. General purpose local governments have imposed upon them responsibility for an extraordinarily wide range of services, including police and fire services, garbage collection, street repair, education, and social services.

Moreover, the type of services provided tend to be pure or quasi-public goods so that it is difficult to exclude residents from services and difficult to provide services in individually divisible units without producing significant externalities. As a result, local governments only rarely provide services in a market-based process and profit is not generally relevant as a criterion of performance. In general. the strategic goals of local governments are broad and ambiguous rather than specific, often target the general welfare, and generate goods and services that cannot be allocated through economic exchange via markets.

Control Processes. The process of control in a general purpose local government can be described in terms of formal and informal mechanisms. Deriving from public ownership and the constitutional and legal bases of government, control of the general purpose local government rests formally with the elected officials of the specific

jurisdiction. A basic design principle of democratic government involves official accountability through the electoral process for decisions and government operations. A second principle gives to elected officials the power to select personnel for top level policy management positions in the executive branch (Lynn, 1987). Following from these principles, strategic management is focused and constrained by political interests, pressures, and schedules.

Formal control is supplemented by various informal control mechanisms. First, democratic values and norms influence the strategic behavior of local government agencies. In addition to the usual demands for economy, efficiency, and effectiveness, the public has expectations about equity honesty, and fair treatment in governmental operations and service delivery. Similarly, the coercive capacity of government requires a special sensitivity to the norms of human rights and liberty and constant attention to government actions which might deny citizens these rights. More generally, governmental performance is subject to evaluation and control in terms of its representativeness, its responsiveness, and its accountability.

Under a universal application criterion, certain government services must be provided equally to all. Selective targeting of service populations to eliminate difficult clients or cases is generally closed to public agencies. Special norms have also evolved concerning the openness of government to its citizen-owners and their self-appointed guardians in the media. As a result, most local governments operate in the open.

More and more pressures for public participation to supplement the roles of elected political leaders have been developed and enacted into law. Participation opens the normal control processes of government to a wide set of actors and pressures during strategy formulation, implementation, and evaluation. Most importantly, various interest groups have emerged around issues and programs, developing such power that they are able to work directly with political leaders and agencies and to mediate between them and their constituencies. This tends to extend the domain of informal controls and further fragment formal control mechanisms. Instead of a strategic process that evaluates demands on rational grounds, we find a highly politicized process impacted by elected officials, political parties, interest groups, and the media.

These basic characteristics of control not only have profound influence on the design and strategic behavior of local government

agencies, but also ensure a high degree of political vulnerability. This vulnerability derives from high expectations and standards of behavior applied to assess governmental performance, fairly rapid turnover of elected officials and their appointees, short political time horizons, openness to outside scrutiny from the public and the media, shared and politicized control by officials in the executive and other branches of government, and the influence of interest groups and political parties.

Financing and Resource Allocation. This review of critical governmental factors affecting the strategic management of general purpose local government agencies would not be complete without noting two other highly significant factors. The first concerns the financing of public organizations through taxation policies backed by the legitimate coercive powers of government. Revenues derived from taxes levied by the general purpose local government, rather than the sale of goods and services, are typically placed in a general revenue fund to be allocated among local agencies.

Two important consequences follow from this practice: first, individuals paying taxes cannot directly link tax payments to specific services they receive as in the case of private goods and services. Second, because public sector resource allocation involves political-administrative bargaining, budgeting is detached from both taxpayers and service users. These processes cause agencies within a local government jurisdiction to compete among themselves for general revenue funds.

Priority setting is further politicized due to the difficulty of finding common bases of evaluation across disparate service lines. In local government agencies, top managers are expected to manage strategically and set direction for the organization within political rather than economic bases of resource acquisition and utilization.

SUMMING UP: IMPACT OF STRUCTURE

From the preceding discussion, we can better appreciate the challenge of strategic management in local government agencies. The nature of legal authority and the control system puts the agency in a subordinate position with highly circumscribed autonomy in matters of strategy and strategic management. The local government agency's jurisdiction, domain, and mission are largely set by external controllers. Even policies, methods, and standards of service delivery may be set by legislative, executive or other external authorities

through statute, ordinance, executive orders, administrative rules or judicial decisions.

Similarly, highly politicized resource allocation requires that managers engage in political influence processes to assure that the agency receives a fair share of fixed revenues. In order to gain funding or support for programs, the agency must compete against other claimants, often through the development of external coalitions or constituencies. Peer agencies are disposed to perceive such activities as threatening their power position and to adopt hostile or defensive postures. Given the lack of measures for evaluation across incommensurate service lines, rival claimants will frequently appeal to political criteria.

Finally, because management errors can lead to punitive actions while successes are discounted by the public or coopted by elected officials, proactive risk taking strategies are discouraged. Agencies are frequently subject to unexpected, often profound disturbances due to rapidly changing public expectations and demands, the turnover of political leadership, changes in laws and court decisions, and the competition of other agencies and governments.

This analysis suggests the very great importance of political considerations in the strategic management of local government agencies. The central strategic concern for local governments is the management of their political dependencies. Given the governmental setting and context, what are the available strategic management approaches? How do these differ from the strategies presented in the private sector literature? If, as suggested earlier, the local government manager must engage in coalition formation to manage these dependencies, how is this accomplished? What coalition arrangements are possible? What bases and means of power and influence can be brought to bear on strategic issues? These questions are addressed in the remainder of this article.

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT IN SUCH AGENCIES

Given constraints on government actions, the strategies of local government agencies can be understood best as an attempt to maintain or improve existing power relationships and to reduce political dependencies. Before presenting evidence supporting these claims, the authors first review the generic literature on the management of external dependencies. This presentation is followed by a discussion of external dependence in the local government context.

A final section presents conclusions from their analysis and suggests additional research topics derived from the dependency management perspective.

CONTROL OF EXTERNAL DEPENDENCIES

Organization theory is replete with analyses on an external dependency perspective. Among the most influential treatments are those of Selnick (1949), Emerson (1962), Blau (1984), Thompson (1967), Jacobs (1974), Pfeffer and Salancik (1978), Aldrich (1979) and Kotter (1979). The control or management of external dependencies is one means of adaptation in the face of changing external or internal conditions. Control is viewed here as the ability to initiate or terminate actions, exchanges, or relationships, implying organizational power and discretion (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). High performance is a function of the organization's capacity to cope with various contingencies through negotiations for needed resources.

The inability of an organization to cope with environmental contingencies leads to external control of critical resources. A number of factors enhance external control by one entity over another: (1) the possession of needed resources; (2) the criticality of the resource to the organization; (3) the lack of alternative suppliers of that resource; (4) the visibility of the behavior being controlled; (5) the discretion allowed the external actor in regard to allocation and use of the resource; (6) the inability of the focal organization to exercise countervailing control over resources critical to the other actor; (7) the capability of the focal organization to comply with the demands of the external actor; and (8) the ability of the external actor to make its preferences known to the focal organization (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978).

For the focal organization, managing external dependencies involves actions to avoid the imposition of external control and to gain greater discretion and autonomy, Conversely, external actors attempting to control the focal organization will seek to impose some or all of the conditions listed above.

From the resource or power dependency perspective, effective strategic management requires that the different elements in the environment of the focal organization be delineated and the resource/power dependency bases be enumerated and weighed. The set of environmental elements will vary widely in composition and relative importance across organizations, with some pronounced

differences when comparing public and private organizations. The private firm would place emphasis on competitors, suppliers of materials and services, customers, owners and outside board members, unions, and regulators and other state, local, and federal government agencies.

In contrast, a local government agency would focus on executive and political authority, the electorate, various constituencies and publics, interest groups, the media, political parties, other governments, influential private sector organizations, other agencies within the local government jurisdiction, public employee unions and professional associations, and user groups as primary elements for strategic consideration.

The bases of power for these sets of elements typically derive from the control of means of coercion, punishment and reward, remuneration, symbols or knowledge and information. The ability to exercise these bases of power arise from several sources including (1) office or structural position; (2) personal characteristics; (3) expertise; and (4) opportunity found in informal structure of action (Bacharach and Lawler, 1980). Formal authority in organizations permits the use of coercion, remuneration, symbols, and information.

Authority is restricted, however, in terms of the number of units or individuals under control (domain), the range of behaviors controlled (scope), and the internal and external beliefs that authority is appropriately exercised (legitimacy). Government power rests largely on the authority derived from constitutional and statutory powers; agency power derives from the authority delegated to it. Additional sources of power and influence are found in other sources referred to above--characteristics of the person, expertise, and opportunities found in informal structures of action.

Activating structural aspects of authority and power in order to manage external dependency relations with various environmental elements is the primary concern of strategic management in the organization or agency. In a now classic presentation, Kotter (1979) proposed a means of conceptualizing the principal approaches available to manage the external dependencies of organizations. He argues that there are two ways to manage external dependence: (1(the organization can reduce demands made by external elements by (a) reducing its dependence on those elements, (b) by gaining some countervailing power over them, or (c) attempting to do both; and (2) minimizing the cost of complying with the demands made by

TABLE 1
STRATEGIES AND TACTICS FOR MANAGING
EXTERNAL DEPENDENCIES

Approach	Strategy	Tactics	GPLGA Use
1. Reduce external demands	1. Choice of domain (products/services (users) (delivery means)	1. Seek environmental niches 2. Expand domain via diversification 3. Incremental steps	1. Yes, via monopoly in jurisdiction 2. Severely limited use 3. Yes, if movement feasible
	2. Establish external linkages	1. Advertising and PR 2. Create large number of boundary spanning roles; recruit from external elements 3. Negotiate contract 4. Coopt key members of external elements 5. Joint ventures and coalitions	1. Limited use given democratic norms 2. Limits on job creation and recruitment 3. Yes, for purchasing and labor agreements 4. To some extent but restricted 5. Some use possible, but costly
	3. Control who	1. Force out competition	1. Can't force out

TABLE 1 (cont.)

operates in the domain and how	2. Join trade association and councils	competing agencies 2. Some participation in inter-agency and intergovernmental councils
	3. Attempt to influence legislation/regulation	3. Yes, some capability here
	4. Use informal norms of industry	4. Yes, some influence here
2. Minimize cost of complying	1. Organizational design 1. Create separate subunits for environmental elements	1. Yes, tactic used to extent resources available; various liaison personnel
	2. Staff and organize subunit to understand and manage environment	2. Yes, concerning understanding, but limited management of elements
	3. Establish mechanisms to resolve conflicts between subunits	3. Centralized response to environmental dependencies develops given accountability of top manager, etc.

(drawn from Kotter, 1979).

those external elements (*Ibid.*). Kotter also suggests the strategies and tactics associated with each approach, as summarized in Table 1.

The last column of the table addresses the relevance of Kotter's strategies and tactics to agencies of general purpose local government. Given the local context or institutional setting of the agency, certain tactics are severely constrained or qualitatively different. For instance, the management of the external domain is restricted given the fixed and relatively unchanging territorial jurisdiction of the local government and its agencies. Population flows might expand or contract the domain of potential users and the type of services to be provided. However, decisions about these domain issues will typically be made by political leadership. Because of the norm of universal application or availability of services, selective provision decisions are quite limited. The agency may or may not have control over the choice of the means of service delivery.

The local government agency has a fairly limited capacity to implement tactics associates with Kotter's domain choice strategy. Since jurisdictional niche is given or mandated, a quasi-monopoly exists for the provision of services within a jurisdiction. Niche shifts are restricted to taking over the service delivery role of another level of government, finding a new line of pubilc service within the same general service category or pursuing the transfer of the service delivery function from another agency of the same local government. One increasingly popular means of niche shifting is privatization, a decision to transfer responsibility for service delivery to the private sector. Again, this approach requires action by political authorities and, therefore, is not always available to agency strategists.

These ideas can also be related to the tactic of diversification. Any service diversification action must be authoritatively mandated by political authorities. In practice, this generally restricts diversification opportunities to the same service category.

A second strategy suggested by Kotter involves the establishment of external linkages. Several differences develop in the applicability of the tactic in this area when general purpose local governments are considered. First, aggressive advertising and public relations are quite restricted, particualrly when they aim at demand creation or obvious agency image building. Funds are rarely made available to agencies for this purpose since elected officials assume it is their responsibility to register demand from the citizenry or to raise issues about the nature and scope of service provisions.

In brief, political authorities generally act to mediate the citizen-

government relationship rather than giving that authority to the agency itself. Second, the requirements of political approval constrain the capacity of the local government agency to create boundary spanning units. Power in many agencies is centralized to such an extent that the agency's chief executive is frequently the exclusive boundary spanner or liaison with political authorities. Thus, the kind of boundary spanning function recommended by Kotter is restricted to more routine, operational processes rather than to strategic management.

The tactics of contracting with environmental elements is also used in a restricted manner. In many instances, collective bargaining with employee unions is handled by a central support agency or by the chief administrative officer of the jurisdiction with only limited involvement by other service delivery agencies. Purchasing is often handled on a government-wide basis and contracting out to private firms is subject to policy and oversight by higher political authority.

A fourth tactic, cooptation of key members of the external environment, can rarely be used by individual local government agencies. Hiring is dominated by government-wide personnel policies and procedures and political appointments to positions in local government agencies are often limited in number or controlled by higher political authority. Placing influential persons on policy-making bodies, which represents the classic example of cooptation (Selznick, 1949), does not apply to local government agencies, although it can be used with great effect for special purpose agencies with independent authority and management by special boards and commissions. Indirect support and legitimacy are often gained by seeking participation of influential members of the community on advisory boards; but, without real power to share, the attractiveness of this tactic is diminished.

The final tactic of external linkage building is the most interesting from the perspective of the local government agency. Joint ventures or collaborations with other units of government as well as with private firms and not-for-profit organizations are widely used to achieve coordination and share responsibility for service delivery. Intergovernmental service delivery represents a special, but important exemplar of the collaborative tactic. In these cases, however, collaboration results from the formal agreement of the respective political authorities, not from unilateral decisions by government agencies.

A principal tactic available to agencies for the acquisition of

resources has been to apply for and to receive grants from other governments. Although the use of this tactic has eroded somewhat in recent years, agencies still can gain degrees of freedom from general government resource constraints by seeking and receiving external funding.

The tactic of forming coalitions takes on a different meaning in the context of the general purpose local government. As noted earlier, the context of local government makes the agency politically vulnerable. In order to minimize this vulnerability, the agency may seek to develop ongoing coalitions of supporters among elected officials and other critical elements of the external environment-interest groups, the media, civic groups, business leaders, labor unions, professional associations, etc. The building of these external coalitions and the mobilizing of their support is often required to defend, maintain or enhance the legitimacy of agency operations.

Activation of third parties is frequently used, for example, to manage the direct authority relationship between the agency head and mayor or city manager. The use of coalition strategies is often required in local government due to fragmented or multi-headed authority structures. Either no single decisional authority exists in the local government or none has the power to provide the necessary approvals of agency action. It is interesting to note, however, that strong strategic action often requires a consensus among a coalition of external stakeholders, whereas action to blunt or reject direct threats to an agency can be achieved by the support of formal power holders alone.

Turning to the last domain choice proposed by Kotter, forcing out or limiting the competition, it is important to note that local government agencies only rarely face competition in a market for services. Instead, they more typically compete with other agencies within the jurisdiction for general revenue funds. It is extremely difficult for an agency to force other government departments or agencies to be less competitive or self-interested. At best, agencies can aim to secure a larger share of general revenues. Informal norms operate to keep the competition in check under the political authority of elected officials.

The second basic approach proposed by Kotter concerns the minimization of the costs of compliance through a strategy for organization design which creates separate and usually decentralized boundary units, well-staffed to understand and manage environmental elements. For the typical local government agency, boundary

spanning is generally centralized in the person of the agency head. Political vulnerability and pressures for accountability force the agency head to manage and control external relations personally. Information control from the top of the agency hierarchy is also required, given the level of demands made by political leadership and the media and the potential political impact of public statements. Selective dissemination of information is one of the levers traditionally controlled by an agency head as a means of buffering external influence attempts.

EXTERNAL DEPENDENCY

The authors have argued that the external control/power dependency is useful as a means of understanding the challenge of strategic management in agencies of general purpose local government. They have shown that such local agencies are particularly susceptible to external control due to the nature of their institutional setting. This political dependency shapes and highly constrains the domain of feasible strategies and tactics. Nevertheless, local government agencies **do** engage in strategic behavior designed to overcome some of the effects of setting and context. Several examples of such behavior support this analysis.

While such agencies are often unable to choose the decision-makers who will ultimately decide their fate, the separation of powers between legislative, executive, and judicial branches occasionally provides an opportunity to move a proposal from an arena in which supporting interests are minimal to one in which they carry maximum weight. Such strategies are commonly used and have been particularly successful for local social service and criminal justice agencies. Many such agencies have won substantial additional revenues from they county commissions, city councils or school boards to improve conditions in county jails, mental health institutions, and schools by taking test cases to the courts (Diver, 1979).

Strategic planning has also been used successfully by local agencies to **prevent** such shifts of arena. A local police department studied by Roy Roberg and Judith Krichhoff (1985) used its strategic plan to demonstrate to a court that the department had in fact addressed issues that the police union was attempting to get the court to consider, thus thwarting an attempt to move the decision-making process to a less advantageous environment.

The maneuvering to gain advantageous arenas does not need to

take so dramatic a form as filing a law suit; it can be as simple as getting the mayor's office to ask the city manager to provide an opinion that a questionable activity requested by a member of the city council exceeds the authority of the agency being pressured. While such activities may be quite complicated, they can occasionally determine the outcome of a policy.

Local government agencies also routinely engage in strategic activities designed to influence the coalition of interests that are important in their setting. Utilizing strategic planning methods, agencies have brought new allies into their supporting coalitions and have solidified existing coalitions. Strategic plans have provided justification for expansion into new service areas (and in the process adding new supporters to an existing coalition) and for resisting attempts at reorganization in periods of changing fortunes.

The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey used the findings from a strategic planning process initiated in 1979 to justify substantial attention to several areas in which the Authority had traditionally played a minimal role--reclaiming the waterfront, marketing the region, rebuilding urban infrastructure, and energy diversification. In the process, it developed new support among regional officials and in the private sector (Meyer, 1983).'

Facing dramatic reductions in ridership and revenues, the public transit authority in Pittsburgh (PATH) engaged in a strategic planning effort to provide guidance to the agency as it sought to address criticisms from unions, from patrons who remained dependent upon the authority, and from downtown business interests. Organizational and management changes suggested by the plan were used to refute charges of agency mismanagement and to rally the local constituency to resist successfully attempts on the part of the county commission and the state legislature to reorganize. In addition, because the measures taken were "reasonable and because staff assisted in formulating the strategic plan ... managers are psychologically committed to PATH's success. Morale is high, and interdepartmental cooperation is now evident in an agency whose future was once in jeopardy" (Fielding, 1987:58).

Finally, a variety of local government agencies have employed strategies emerging from formal planning processes to their advantage during negotiations with local legislatures over budgets. Roberg and Krichhoff (1985) describe the success achieved by a county sheriff in using his strategic plan to justify substantial **increases** in his budget. And the research of Levine, Rubin, and Wolohojian (1981)

supports the contention that agencies that employed strategic planning were the least likely to sustain deep and lasting **cuts** in funds during periods of retrenchment.

Thus strategic planning and management have been used successfully in the past and can be used in the future by local government agencies to provide direction in the complicated external environment within which they function. We should not, however, overstate the potential for these techniques; success in strategic planning is not achieved mechanistically, with one thing leading inexorably to another as prescribed by the strategy. Agency managers must face up to decisions about if, when, and how to engineer changes in strategy and how to keep their balance when the necessity for a change occurs. "It is the presence of such skill that distinguishes the political virtuoso from the merely rational public manager" (Bardach, 1972:72).

FUTURE RESEARCH NEEDS

Although this discussion has centered on the local government agency, the main arguments should also apply to state and federal agencies. This exploratory article suggests several lines of further inquiry as a means of generalizing and extending the external control perspective. Further study is needed if we are to achieve a more complex specification of local government strategies and tactics. Another line of inquiry, already begun in state government strategic management research (Wechsler and Backoff, 1986, 1987), would examine particular public sector strategic episodes and attempt to identify patterns of organizational action based on the sequence of tactics and strategies over one or more episodes.

The strategic life cycle in public sector organizations is also interesting to research. Possibly a longitudinal perspective would suggest the contingencies associated with different types of strategies and tactics, leading to more prescriptive conclusions for strategic management. Finally, we should begin to compare the results of public sector studies with those from other sectors. Comparative research seems to be the best vehicle for determining the usefulness of the strategic management approach in public organizations.

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