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Wakeup Call: Strategic Management, Network Alarms, and Performance

Tough Contemporary Public Management Dilemmas

New empirical evidence suggests that service performance is shaped by the strategies adopted by public organizations and the networking behavior of public managers.

Strategy captures two central behavioral aspects of public organizations: the way in which objectives and actions are selected (processes), and an organization's approach to service delivery (content). Networking is similarly concerned with the behavior of public managers as they interact with others. These twin themes are linked in an integrated study that explores the relationship between strategy, networking, and service performance within a sample of English local governments. The results show that strategy processes based on rational planning offer long-run positive effects on public services, as does a strategic proactive stance.

Management's contribution to the performance of public programs is increasingly recognized as positive and substantively important (Boyne et al. 2006; Ingraham, Joyce, and Donohue 2003). Although managers are by no means the only determinant of performance, they can improve organizational effectiveness—sometimes in substantial ways. While the literature in this field grows apace, the generation of systematic research to validate this idea has only just begun. This article develops this theme further by synthesizing research on two well-recognized managerial influences on performance in the public sector—those regarding strategic management and managerial networking (Agranoff and McGuire 2003; Moore 1995).

Strategy reflects a broad, long-term orientation to how an organization should conduct its operations. If the mushrooming literature on strategy is correct, this aspect of management is ignored only at peril to

performance (Lane and Wallis 2009; Moore 1995). Similarly, the networks in which public organizations operate and the actors with whom managers deal in their environment have emerged as prominent themes in an era of “governance” encompassing more than just individual governments (Agranoff and McGuire 2003; Huxham 2000; Rhodes 1997, 1999). The objective of this article is to examine both potential contributions to performance. We do so for an important empirical context beyond the United States: English local government.

The effects of strategy and networking on performance are worthy of attention for a number of reasons. First, strategy captures two central behavioral aspects of public organizations: strategy processes are concerned with how objectives and actions are selected and thereby encapsulate the internal dynamics of decision making in public organizations, and strategy content refers to an organization's approach to service delivery (Boyne and Walker 2004; Elbanna 2006; Hart 1992). Second, networks are constellations of actors who, operating interdependently, coproduce public services. Networks have structural and behavioral (i.e., networking) facets, and the majority of attention in the field of public management has been on the

former (Walker, O'Toole, and Meier 2007). While network structure is clearly important, behavior shapes performance consequences through the actions of public managers and is an essential feature of modern public management research. Third, taken together, strategy and networking are among the most important aspects of public management because they are concerned with how organizations and their management align themselves with their socioeconomic, political, and institutional environments.

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A “fit” between organizations and the external circumstances that they face has long been considered essential to high performance (Blau and Scott 1962; Ketchen, Thomas, and McDaniel 1996).

To date, these theories, and empirical tests thereof, have been developed independently. We bring together these two lines of theorizing by testing the relationships of strategy, networking, and external constraints with organizational performance. Some semblance of causality in our modeling is achieved by introducing a lag between the measurement of our dependent and independent variables, and by controlling for environmental effects. We also analyze whether strategy and networking add to (or subtract from) performance by controlling for baseline performance. This enables us to judge whether, for example, more networking activity occurs in settings that experience lower performance at an earlier time.

Strategic Management, Networking, and Performance

We develop expectations about how strategy and managerial networking might influence public organizational performance using two prominent lines of theorizing that have treated them separately, and then draw the two together for analysis.

Strategic Management

Those examining how organizational strategy relates to performance typically make a distinction between the mode by which organizations develop their approach to action and the actual substance of the strategy employed. The term “strategy processes” (or strategy making) refers to how an organization’s objectives and actions are selected or formulated (Hart 1992). The outcome of strategy making is strategy content, or “stance,” which can be defined as an organization’s approach to service provision. Previous empirical studies have examined the impact of strategy content or strategy processes, but rarely both.

Rational planning and logical incrementalism are the two main models of strategy formulation in the management literature (Elbanna 2006; Quinn 1980). They are anticipated to have different consequences for organizational performance: rational planning is assumed to have a positive impact (Boyne 2001; Crittenden, Crittenden, and Hunt 1998; Odom and Boxx 1988), and logical incrementalism a negative consequence (Dean and Sharfman 1996; Elbanna 2006; but see Braybrooke and Lindblom 1963). The beneficial effects of rational planning are argued to flow from the analytical, formal, and logical processes through which organizations scan the internal and external environment, and develop policy options that are different from the status quo (Dror 1973; Mintzberg 1994). Logical incrementalism is based on a political rather than an analytical approach to strategy formulation, and therefore it is characterized by conflict over resource allocation, policy goals, or organizational power, inside or outside the organization (Elbanna 2006). Such conflict is likely to damage performance because it may lead to inopportune decision making, drift in seeking goal attainment, a lack of transparency, and a poor interpretation of the external organizational environment (Dean and Sharfman 1996; Elbanna 2006). Recent evidence presented by Andrews et al. (2009) shows

that logical-incremental processes result in organizations struggling to meet the performance requirements of key stakeholders in their external environment.

Our conceptualization of strategy content is derived from the well-known perspective of Miles and Snow (1978), which designates three different strategies—prospecting, defending, and reacting. *Prospectors* are organizations that “almost continually search for market opportunities, and . . . regularly experiment with potential responses to emerging environmental trends” (Miles and Snow 1978, 29). These organizations often pioneer the development of new products and services. *Defenders* are organizations that take a conservative view of new product development. They typically compete on price and quality rather than on new products or markets and “devote primary attention to improving the efficiency of their existing operations” (29); in short, they seek better performance on a limited number of core products and services. *Reactors* are organizations in which top managers frequently perceive change and uncertainty in their organizational environments but lack a consistent and stable strategy. A reactor “seldom makes adjustment of any sort until forced to do so by environmental pressures” (29). We argue that all organizational strategies are a mix of prospecting, defending, and reacting (for a similar perspective, see Boyne and Walker 2004).

We develop expectations about how strategy and managerial networking might influence public organizational performance from two prominent lines of theorizing that have treated them separately, and then draw them together for analysis.

These stances cover the major possible organizational adaptations to new circumstances. A prospector is a proactive agency (Boschken 1988) and will be scanning the external environment and may innovate in response to changes. By contrast, a defender is focused on its core business and will seek to consolidate its position in response to changes in the external environment, perhaps adopting innovations once they have been tried and tested elsewhere. A reactor awaits instructions from the external environment and has no consistent or coherent strategy of its own; as such, it displays an absence of strategy (Inkpen and Chaudhury 1995).

Using data drawn from very different governmental contexts, a number of studies have shown that the central hypothesis of Miles and Snow—that prospectors and defenders are higher performers than reactors—does not hold in all situations (see, e.g., Andrews, Boyne, and Walker 2006; Meier et al. 2007). This is to be expected because if organizational strategy is contingent, so are its chances for success (see similar results from Woodside, Sullivan, and Trappey 1999; Zajac and Shortell 1989).

Networking

Along with developing strategy to achieve public purposes, public managers and their organizations operate in a network of other organizations and actors who influence users, resources, programs, goals, and reputation. “Networks” in this sense consist of a pattern of interdependence among social actors in which at least a portion of the links are framed in terms of something other than superior–subordinate relations (O’Toole 1997).

Networks have been documented as an important part of service production and delivery in many national settings and different levels of

government. Such networks are typically located within a governance framework (Kickert, Klijn, and Koppenjan 1997; Lynn, Heinrich, and Hill 2001; Rhodes 1997). Governance systems are “self-organizing, interorganizational networks” (Rhodes 1999, xvii) that have four characteristics: interdependence between organizations, a significant degree of autonomy from the state, continuing interactions between network members, and game-like interactions. Much scholarship has been directed at the first two of these characteristics, which focus on the structural aspects of networking, and when behavior is examined, it is typically conflated with structural arrangements. Nonetheless, a literature is emerging on the latter two behavioral aspects, and these are our concern in this article (Edelenbos and Klijn 2007; Meier and O’Toole 2001; Walker, O’Toole, and Meier 2007).

It is important to explore network behavior because researchers have argued that management in a network is different from that in a hierarchy (see Klijn 1996). External organizations and actors typically elude the formal control of actors within a given organization. Given the potential influence of these external agents, how public officials respond to the complexity of their setting and manage the interdependent environment is nonetheless important and contributes to the performance of their organizations (Donahue et al. 2004; O’Toole and Meier 2004a, 2004b).

In this article, we seek to advance knowledge by analyzing the effects of networking as an aggregate activity (Meier and O’Toole 2001), and also by decomposing networking into its constituent nodes. Based on prior research, we anticipate that networking will be positively associated with organizational performance, but that when we examine dyadic interactions with specific nodes, a variety of more complex relationships will be found. In particular, one function potentially performed by managers’ openness to the interdependent environment is the receipt of performance-related feedback that can enter the core organization’s production system and positively influence the direction of public service outputs and outcomes. Indeed, norms of accountability and tenets of democratic theory would expect such feedback to be an encouragement to performance (Redford 1969). We are particularly interested in exploring whether specific groups of network actors might ring out a “wakeup call” when performance deteriorates or, alternatively, chime the bells of success when performance moves in the desired direction.

A lack of systematic evidence thus far on such relationships hampers our discussion of the likely consequences of networking with particular network partners for organizational performance. The theoretical literature on legislative-bureaucratic interactions, however, provides some guidance (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984). To monitor the performance of bureaucracies, legislatures create opportunities for user groups and others to comment on agency performance either through formal hearings or constituent complaints (Aberbach 1990; McCubbins, Noll, and Weingast 1987). Legislatures have a wide variety of tools (budgets, legislation, oversight, etc.) to transform this information into a “wakeup call” for the agency.

How does this wakeup call process fit into the agency’s network? Agencies have regular contact with a wide variety of actors—user

groups, other agencies, elected officials. User groups in particular have detailed knowledge of agency performance and can directly communicate with the agency. While the agency has the incentive to respond to user group demands, for many reasons, it may not do so immediately. In such circumstances, the user group can appeal to a legislator in regard to the complaint, or more bluntly seek someone in a position of power who can issue a wakeup call to the underperforming agency.

Because of that earlier work, we anticipate that elected officials who have direct or perhaps indirect political responsibility for administrative performance would be most likely to press concerns about underperformance or complaints from constituents on to public managers. Other sorts of actors—for instance, user groups and business leaders—might also raise concerns about poor performance, while also being in position to provide potentially useful information to public managers about how services might be improved. Public managers in other jurisdictions might serve as sources of useful information and assist performance, as has been found in earlier research by O’Toole and Meier (2004a) in school districts in the United States. In short, managerial networking might carry various implications for performance, depending on which actors interact and the nature of those interactions.

Public Management in English Local Authorities

English local authorities are the primary subnational governing arrangement and an important deliverer of public services. Local authorities are directly governed by politically elected bodies with a Westminster-style cabinet system of political management. They are multipurpose units delivering education, social services, regulatory services (such as land-use planning and environmental health), housing, libraries, leisure services, and welfare benefits in specific geographic areas. In urban areas, authorities deliver all of these services; in rural areas, a two-tier system prevails, with county councils providing environmental, housing, welfare, and regulatory functions. Authorities are not all-purpose; for example, health is provided by separate authorities. As such, they employ professional career staff, including public managers, and receive around two-thirds of their income and guidance on the implementation of legislation from the central government.

Beyond broad environmental characteristics, an aspect of the management of English local authorities that can be noted is a fairly diverse set of external actors with which the organizations might be interdependent and with whom managers can be expected to interact. Two sorts of political actors can be noted: “elected members” heading the local authorities, along with members of Parliament—MPs—representing the locality in the national political arena. Both types are likely to make regular and frequent demands on managers. Elected members are part of a local authority but are somewhat removed from the bureaucracy. They are more likely to interact with managers when there are performance problems. This could be in response to complaints they receive from electors or the judgments passed on to services or the organization as a whole from regulators. They can be expected to seek to ensure that such problems are resolved, to either guarantee the delivery of better services to citizens

or to enhance their chances for success in the next round of elections; we anticipate that elected members will respond to performance-related alarm bells when things go awry. The same argument applies to MPs. If constituents or others bring problems about the local authority to MPs' offices, contact with managers is likely to be initiated in regard to apparent difficulties.

Explicitly political actors, however, are not the only ones who are likely to care about performance. A second cluster of external actors with whom authority managers may interact can bring performance deficits to the attention of the authority and/or offer useful information about how to improve service delivery. In the English context, these are principally user groups (stakeholders who receive public services and care about such programs), business leaders, and representatives of the voluntary sector. Such external actors may make demands on managers and ring out alarm calls when there are performance problems, but they are also capable of providing valuable information to managers on how improvements to service may be made. This sort of interaction can be expected to be based on the immediate service delivery experiences of these groups, their perceptions about the local organizational environment, and the pressures and demands that these groups place on local authorities for changes in services. Managers in other local authorities, still another type of possible interaction partner, can be a source of information on practice elsewhere and therefore can provide technical assistance. We expect such peer-to-peer network interaction to be positively related to organizational performance.

Finally, two other kinds of actors in the networked environment of English local managers can be noted, and interactions with each could have either positive or negative performance implications: central government actors in the national bureaucracy and trade unions. Trade unions are able to provide authority managers with information on human resource management issues within an authority. This information and interaction with unions may assist managers in moving toward higher performance goals, and it may equally frustrate them. Similar arguments apply to central government, which can be a force for improvement by providing advice and guidance on strategies for performance enhancement. Equally, given the distance from local authorities, the relatively infrequent interaction with managers, and the focus on policy, oversight, and matters of finance, central government actions may be seen as interference in authorities' organization and management ("micro-management"), resulting in a detrimental effect on service improvement. We therefore have no *ex ante* expectation regarding the likely performance consequences of either of these network nodes.

Data and Methods

Given these considerations, our approach is to model the performance of English local authorities as a function of strategic management, managerial networking, and authorities' environmental circumstances. Data for this study were drawn from a survey of English local authorities (for data collection procedures and pilot information, see Enticott 2003), along with information collected by government departments and the decennial national census. The survey explored informants' perceptions of strategy processes and content as well as managerial networking. All questions were in the form of Likert-scales, ranging from 1 (disagree) to 7 (agree), unless otherwise stated.

Multiple informant data were collected from staff at the corporate and service level in each organization.¹ Two echelons were used to overcome the possible sample bias problem faced in surveying large numbers of informants from one organizational level. Research has shown that the attitudes of employees differ systematically (Aiken and Hage 1968), and in this study, we selected corporate and service officers for the two echelons because attitudes have been found to vary between these positions. For this sample, a simple organizational mean would drown out the voices of the smaller numbers of corporate officers surveyed.² To avoid this problem, we calculated an organizational mean by averaging the mean of corporate officers and the mean of service officers.

This study is based on a sample of 101 authorities that were surveyed in 2002 and 2003. The authorities in this sample are representative of all authorities on key background characteristics.³ Analysis is conducted on the 69 major authorities that replied in each year and that provided full data.⁴ Measures of management were collected in the summer of 2003 (t), and measures of performance were recorded in December 2002 ($t - 1$) and 2003 ($t + 1$). Data for the environmental control variables were derived from the 2001 census. The collection of data at three points in time addresses some of the potential causality ambiguities that may arise in the relationship between networking and performance. Put simply, in a cross-sectional research design, it may be difficult to establish whether performance prompts managerial networking, or whether networking influences performance. It is the latter causal connection that we primarily test in this study: managerial networking as an explanatory variable, and performance as the dependent variable.

One way we deal with the potential causal ambiguity is to include a lag between our measures of management (t)—both strategy and networking—and performance ($t + 1$) (see models 1, 2, and 3). We go beyond this step and offer a tougher test by controlling for prior performance ($t - 1$) (see model 4). In this way, we examine whether strategy and networking add to (or subtract from) the performance baseline at $t - 1$. We supplement this core line of analysis by examining the relationship between performance at $t - 1$ and networking at time t . Doing so provides a check on whether more network activity occurs in settings that experience lower performance at the earlier time.

Measures

The core service performance (CSP) element of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment, devised by the Audit Commission (2002), is the dependent variable in this article. The CSP is determined for each of the seven service areas; it is based largely on archival performance indicators, supplemented by the results of inspection and assessment of statutory plans (Andrews et al. 2005). The archival performance indicators cover six aspects of organizational performance: quantity of outputs (e.g., number of home helps for the elderly), quality of outputs (e.g., number of serious injuries on highways), efficiency (e.g., cost per benefit claimed), formal effectiveness (e.g., average school passes at age 16), equity (e.g., equal access to public housing), and consumer satisfaction (e.g., satisfaction with waste collection). Inspection of services draws on internal improvement plans, field visits, and other documentation. Statutory plans are assessed against the criteria of the service's relevant central government department. Evaluators external to the local authority

conduct all assessments. Each service area is given a performance score by the Audit Commission, ranging from 1 (lowest) to 4 (highest).

After calculating the CSP score for each service area, the Audit Commission derives a score for the whole organization by weighting services to reflect their relative importance by budget (the weight for education and social services is 4; for environment health and housing, it is 2, and for libraries and leisure, benefits, and management of resources, it is 1). The Audit Commission then combines these weights with the performance score (1–4) for each service area to calculate the CSP. The resulting scores range from a minimum of 15 (12 in the case of county councils, which do not provide housing or benefits) to a maximum of 60 (48 for county councils). To make the CSP scores comparable across all authorities, we calculated the percentage of the maximum possible CSP score for the given local government. Therefore, the measure of organizational performance in this study is an aggregate measure across the key services areas of local governments and includes multiple indicators of performance for each service area.

To measure *strategy process*, an aspect of strategic management, factor analysis was used to create indices of our multiple measures of logical incrementalism and rational planning. The extent and intensity of formal analysis in processes of strategy formulation are captured in our measures of rational planning. Also included is a measure of consultation with stakeholders, which is part of environmental scanning in public organizations. The second major model of strategy-making processes in public agencies is logical incrementalism (Quinn 1980). Our measures include the central features of this type of strategy process: bargaining and negotiation, small changes from the status quo, and a reliance on partisan mutual adjustment rather than formal analysis.⁵

Strategy content was measured with single items. The *prospector* stance was operationalized through a measure of innovation (“The authority/service is at the forefront of innovative approaches”); this feature is central to Miles and Snow’s (1978) definition, which includes risk taking and proactive responses to changes in the external environment. To explore the extent to which services in English local authorities display *defender* characteristics, focusing on tried and tested strategies in an existing market, informants were asked whether “[f]ocusing upon key business areas (e.g., our statutory responsibilities not our discretionary services)” was part of their approach to service delivery. *Reactors* were expected to await instructions on how to respond to environmental change. The major source of external pressure in English local government is currently the auditors and inspectors deployed by central government (there is at least one for each of our sampled services). Therefore, we asked whether “the activities of auditors” and “inspectors’ reports” were important in driving improvement.

We sought to examine the reported *networking* behavior of English local government officers in interacting with a variety of important stakeholders in their environment. We asked respondents to “[i]ndicate how frequently you interact with individuals in the following

groups: elected members, user group representatives, trade unions, local business leaders, voluntary sector actors, MPs, managers in other councils, and central government officials” (eigenvalue 3.023, 37.79 percent of variance explained). Each informant was asked how often he or she interacted with each of the several other actors. A six-point scale was used, where 1 = never, 2 = yearly, 3 = monthly, 4 = weekly, 5 = more than once a week, and 6 = daily. These items were developed to adapt measures shown to be valid and reliable in the U.S. context (Meier and O’Toole 2001, 2003; O’Toole and Meier 2004a) to the interdependent, networked setting characteristic of English local government.

Controls

A variety of external circumstances may cloud the relationship between management and organizational performance and require researchers to control for the difficulty of the environment as managers seek to deliver performance results. In this paper, two factors are included in our statistical models that are derived from measures of the quantity and diversity of service need: an index of deprivation, the number of single parents in a local authority, and the employment, ethnic, and social class mix within the population (all drawn from the 2001 census).⁶

We control for prior performance at $t - 1$ by including CSP in 2002 in the statistical models. Doing so overcomes the potential for bias in the coefficients for other variables such as strategy and networking. When the autoregressive term is included in the model, the coefficients for strategy and networking show what these variables have added to (or subtracted from) the performance baseline, and allow us to make observations about effect of strategy and networking on performance at different points in time.

Findings

Table 1 presents the results of four multiple regression analyses designed to estimate managerial impacts on the performance of local authorities.⁷ All models contain strategy content and process, plus managerial networking. Model 1 examines strategic management and networking at the aggregate level. Model 2 disaggregates the networking measure by estimating the performance-related impacts of interactions with each of the separate sets of actors in the authority’s environment. Model 3 takes a parsimonious look at the influence of four key networking nodes. These three models are not fully specified equations: while each has a lag between the measure of management and performance, they are not autoregressive—they do not include past performance as a partial determinant of future performance. Model 4, on the other hand, includes the lagged dependent variable, and therefore is the most fully specified model estimated. This specification permits a clearer analysis of causality and allows us to draw conclusions on the impact of management over different time periods.

The discussion of the results focuses on the findings for strategic management and managerial networking; we leave aside extended commentary on the impact of the environmental controls. With regard to the latter, nonetheless, it can be noted that in all models aside from the final one, the coefficients

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Table 1. Strategy, Networking, and Performance

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
<i>Strategic management</i>								
Rational planning	1.76+	1.02	1.94*	.95	2.26**	.97	.52	.63
Logical incrementalism	-.78	.89	-1.12	.87	-1.02	.88	-.00	.54
Prospector	4.02**	1.36	3.44**	1.26	2.99*	1.29	-.77	.85
Defender	-3.83**	1.22	-3.38**	1.13	-3.29**	1.15	-2.40**	.78
Reactor	-.32	.73	-0.82	.67	-.47	.69	.21	.44
<i>Networking</i>								
Networking	-.40	.84	—	—	—	—	—	—
Elected members	—	—	-3.45+	2.10	-5.17**	1.97	-1.86	1.33
Managers in other councils	—	—	4.32+	2.65	4.31+	2.38	.95	1.59
User group representatives	—	—	4.80*	2.34	5.37**	2.09	4.59***	1.32
Central government officials	—	—	-6.46**	2.32	-5.42***	2.29	-2.99*	1.44
Local business leaders	—	—	-.41	1.94	—	—	—	—
Voluntary sector actors	—	—	3.23	2.18	—	—	—	—
MPs	—	—	-1.46	2.21	—	—	—	—
Trade unions	—	—	-1.86	1.70	—	—	—	—
<i>Prior Performance</i>								
2002 performance	—	—	—	—	—	—	.66***	.00
<i>Controls</i>								
Deprivation	-1.76**	.77	-2.17**	.79	-2.51***	.76	.40	.53
Diversity	-1.84*	.81	-2.90***	.83	-2.35**	.86	-1.66**	.54
(Constant)	68.87***	13.60	80.02***	16.59	83.50***	17.06	38.21**	12.17
<i>R</i> ² /Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	.41/.34		.59/.47		.51/.42		.83/.79	
<i>F</i>	5.30***		5.13***		5.45***		21.50***	

+ $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

for the variables deprivation and diversity are in the anticipated direction and statistically significant ($p < .05$). In the final model (model 4), the coefficient for deprivation is not significant (past performance may capture this aspect of the external environment), whereas the impact of the diversity variable persists in the face of prior achievements. Overall, these findings confirm that difficult environments limit English local authorities' progress toward higher levels of service performance (Andrews et al. 2005).

Strategy Processes, Strategy Content, and Networking

Table I reports results for strategy formulation, strategic stance, and our aggregated measure of networking. The first finding, and one that supports prior research in this field, is that rational planning processes are associated with better organizational performance. By contrast, logical incremental processes of strategy formulation appear to have little effect on service achievements. The second finding is that prospecting leads to higher levels of performance. This finding is consistent with the view that organizations that are innovative, outward looking, and responsive to changes in the external environment are likely to be better performers.

A number of the findings in model 1, however, are counter to extant empirical evidence from other settings. First, defending is negatively associated with organizational performance; this result is persistent

through the four models. The finding is at odds with some prior studies, and it is contrary to the argument of Miles and Snow, who maintain that there are no performance differences between prospectors and defenders. While this view has been supported in the private sector literature (Slater and Olson 2001), prior findings in U.K. local government and elsewhere (Woodside, Sullivan, and Trappey 1999) typically suggest that "prospecting beats defending," and that prospecting and defending organizations both outperform those that are predominately reacting. Prospectors clearly beat defenders in this case, but defenders do not outperform reactors when strategy processes and managerial networking are held constant. Central government in England has exhorted local authorities to abandon traditional ways of working and become more innovative (Walker and Boyne 2006). Perhaps the authorities that are best managed have shifted to a prospector stance, whereas defenders have stuck with a strategic posture that is ill-adapted to this policy environment. Further longitudinal analysis would be required to examine whether prospecting is a recent shift in the English local government system, and to examine whether it is associated with other indicators of managerial quality. Given the divergent findings on strategy content across different empirical contexts, it may be that the optimal strategic posture depends on organizational type (including public-private differences), relevant production function, and organizational context.

The second surprising finding is that when we consider networking as an aggregated variable, it has no effect on performance. This result is at odds with research on this measure in other governmental contexts. Positive results have been found in settings such as public education, state administration, and law enforcement in the United States, and it is possible that networking behavior is contingent on context. It may be that when we control for strategy, some of the effects of networking may be diluted; however, this pattern did not hold in a recent evaluation of strategic management and other management practices, including networking, in Texas school districts (Meier et al. 2007).

Examining Network Nodes

The findings in model 1 suggest the need to unpack networking behavior more fully. The key question we are now interested in pursuing is, why is overall networking not significant? Model 2 in table 1 includes the networking measure in its disaggregated form. This specification reveals that one of the coefficients for the dyadic interactions—that for central government officials—is negatively related to performance, and that for elected members could be considered negatively related to performance at a more relaxed level of significance ($p < .10$). A first observation we can draw from this pattern is that some of the network nodes have little or no effect on service performance. Additional research would be required to understand the value that networking with these nodes has for English local government: for example, they may make contributions in indirect, nonlinear, or interactive ways. Second, networking with central government actors is related to lower levels of performance. Our data do not permit us to model who initiated the interaction over time—the local authority managers or central government actors. We can get a sense of the causal direction, however, by correlating the extent of networking in this dyadic pair with performance in the preceding period. The negative result ($-.102$) suggests that lesser performance attracted some increased attention to local authorities on the part of central government actors. More extensive longitudinal data would assist in clarifying causality in this relationship by exploring the leading and lagging effect of networking on performance. The evidence now available points toward poor performance attracting interest from higher levels of government.

One of the dyadic interaction coefficients in model 2—that for user group representatives—is positive and statistically significant, and the coefficient for interacting with managers in other councils is positive and significant at the lower 10 percent threshold. When public officials network with managers in other councils and with user group representatives, they are likely to achieve higher levels of organizational performance. User group representatives often give advice on their needs and perspectives, and this channel of communication should encourage and assist managers in local authorities in delivering appropriate services. The role of users is important in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment regime through performance indicators and the inspection process. Therefore, their perspective is likely to be treated rather seriously. The finding is consistent with the notion that authorities that respond to the needs of their users are directly rewarded by higher performance. The correlation pattern between performance and networking supports this interpretation. A negative relationship between prior performance and networking ($-.060$) becomes a positive one between the networking measure and subsequent performance ($.097$). Our results

also suggest that performance is higher when managers consult their peers in other councils, as this presumably allows them to acquire information that they can use to improve services in their own organizations, another result that reflects findings in U.S. public education (O'Toole and Meier 2004a). (The correlation between this networking measure and performance is positive for both earlier and later performance measures.) Interaction with managers in other localities can also be juxtaposed with evidence on interorganizational learning and innovation diffusion. Evidence from these two processes suggests that the collection of information and knowledge from other localities can be used to improve or develop new practices, which are, in turn, associated with higher performance (Crutchfield and Grant 2008; Walker and Damanpour 2009).

Finally, the other interaction dyad with a (marginally) negative sign is of particular interest: the result for elected members is significant at the 10 percent level and negative.⁸ Interestingly, the correlation between earlier performance and networking in this dyad, too, is negative ($-.133$), a relationship that again suggests performance deficits attract the attention of elected members. While the relationship between networking in this dyad and subsequent performance remains negative, the correlation between the two moves closer toward zero ($-.061$). It is possible, therefore, that elected members begin during this period to assist in achieving improved levels of performance by providing additional information and strategies for action to public officials, but that the improvements have only begun to take effect at time $t + 1$ in this empirical sequence. Again, a longer time series would be essential to explore the pattern more thoroughly. If validated in further extensive studies, this relationship could bode well for those interested in the responsiveness of public organizations to the broader political-electoral system.

Network Nodes of Interest and Importance

The results from model 2 suggest that the network node actors elected members, managers in other councils, user group representatives, and central government actors are important (at 10 percent or better). Accordingly, we move on to examine the independent effects of these four actors in model 3, and thereby present a more parsimonious model. In separating out these four nodes from the others, we find, first, that all of them are statistically significant (at $p < .10$ or better). These results bring networking with elected members into statistical significance at the 5 percent level, and the coefficient remains negative—as it was in model 2. Interactions with central government actors remain negative and statistically significant. Dyadic interactions with user group representatives remain positive and beneficial to organizational performance; public officials possibly use these external network nodes as sources of information and technical assistance to enhance performance. A similar argument can be made in relation to managers in other authorities, although this variable is only significant at the 10 percent level. The coefficients for the strategic stance and strategy formulation variables remain unchanged from model 2.

Networking and Strategy in the Face of Prior Performance

Model 4 in table 1 presents results for the fully specified model by introducing the autoregressive performance term. Model 4 confirms our assumptions about prior performance: it is far and away the most statistically significant variable in the model. The results in

model 4, when compared with model 3, suggest some differences between the short-run and long-run effects of the management variables. Prospecting, rational planning, and networking with elected members and managers in other local authorities have long-run effects on performance (assuming some stability in these activities across councils), but their short-run impacts from 2002 were negligible (falling from statistical significance in model 4). By contrast, in that year, defending continued to be bad for performance, as did interactions with central government. Networking with user group representatives remains a positive contribution to performance in both time periods.

Changes in the statistical significance for the networking node variables between models 3 and 4 provide evidence in support of a causal logic of the following sort: managerial networking with elected members is related to lower performance in model 3. Given the negative simple correlation results between networking at time t and performance at $t-1$, as reported earlier, the likely explanation is that lower performance attracts attention from elected members. Over a longer time series, it is possible that we would see networking of this sort move performance upward. When the autoregressive term is included in model 4, this variable is not statistically significant. In other words, when we take into account prior performance, the short-run effects of interacting with elected members do not immediately register—although, again, the simple correlation between networking and performance shortly afterward is less negative than in the preceding period. The evidence suggests that elected members ring out alarm calls when performance deteriorates (see the results for models 2 and 3), and that this is a normal aspect of organizational life in English local governments. In the full specification, the variable tapping interaction with managers in other councils also drops out of significance (model 4). Again, this suggests that this activity may be a normal and ongoing management function rather than one that has particular short-term effects on performance.

Interactions with two of the network nodes in our parsimonious model remain statistically significant in model 4. Managers interact with user group representatives to collect information and possibly to gain assistance in order to effectuate performance improvement. These findings indicate that elected members ring out wakeup calls when performance deteriorates, and managers in such councils take action by talking with user groups. We also find that interaction with central government officials continues to be negatively related to service performance. That networking with central government officials remains consistently negative and significant would seem to suggest that they offer bad advice. Three reasons, all of which require further work, may explain this pattern.

In a centralized political system such as that in England, civil servants are responsible for pushing forward with the implementation of universal prescriptions. Examples of this pattern have included privatization and outsourcing during the New Right Thatcher-dominated 1980s and the modernization agenda of the New Labour administration during the late 1990s. Such practices are at odds with

the contingent nature of management, as has long been argued in the public administration literature (Greenwood, Hinings, and Ranson 1975). Second, based on our prior conjecture, these central government officials are at both a hierarchical and a spatial distance from local governments. It would be interesting to see whether central government officials offer better advice to councils nearby, rather than those more geographically removed. Third, as central government civil servants many of these officers will have little or no experience in directly managing services, the basis of the recommendations they offer to councils may not be founded on the best or most reliable of evidence. Indeed, the central officials may provide pressure or advice that borders on micromanagement, even if well intended. In any event, the statistical evidence adduced here suggests a performance-based reason for the often-observed central-local tensions in multi-level governance systems. The good news, such as it is, appears to be that lower performance attracts attention even from the center. The bad news is that the resulting interactions do not seem to help.

Conclusions

Strategic management and managerial networking have been shown in this analysis to be important for the performance of a sample of English local governments. These findings offer new insights into two important and topical issues in public management research.

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We are able to conclude that the strategy process of rational planning appears to have positive effects. This finding suggests that logical, clearly planned strategies in which options are appraised are a useful route to better performance. We are cautious, however, about the generalizability of this result because of the policy context that prompts English local governments to seek rational plan-based solutions. Consequently, alternative settings

may point toward the importance of adaptive or emergent strategies (Mintzberg 1994), notably when the organizational environment is turbulent, making the process of planning more complex and demanding. We find that a strategic stance of prospecting has positive effects, but that defending is detrimental to performance. Clearly further research in different contexts, and ideally with longitudinal data sets, is needed to substantiate this and all of the findings presented in this article.

We find that networking overall, as an aggregate concept, has no impact on performance, but rather that interactions with different network nodes matter—some more than others. The “whole,” in a sense, is *less* than the sum of its parts. It is only by examining the dyad-by-dyad interactions that one can discern which nodes matter for performance, in the short and longer haul, and in which directions. Furthermore, this analysis shows that such interactions are not necessarily an unmitigated good thing—some appear to weaken performance, while others boost it. Future research certainly should examine networking in terms of individual nodes, where appropriate, and it also would be helpful for scholars to unpack the different types of functions that such networking can fulfill: feedback on performance, technical assistance, and building support, for instance. These functions can be distinguished, and it is likely that different parties are more or less effective at the different functions.

In the present instance, our evidence is consistent with the following sequence of events.⁹ Alarm bells are rung out by elected members in the face of poor performance; managers in other councils chime in (or are encouraged to do so) to help remedy poor performance; user group representatives harmonize by consistently providing valuable information to managers in the search for higher levels of performance; central government officials attend to the signals but persistently strike chords of dissonance and may actually harm performance. This pattern suggests that networking is a particularly complex process and that more theoretical and empirical attention needs to be focused on the various roles played by network nodes in diverse governmental settings.

If validated by further studies in other contexts, these results suggest that practicing public managers would do well to consider serious efforts at rational planning and that, under some circumstances, at least, a strategy of prospecting can pay performance dividends. Further, managerial networking carries implications for the delivery of public services, albeit not in an undifferentiated or simplistic fashion. External parties clearly can be the source of valuable information and advice regarding performance, and managers would do well to attend to such wakeup calls. But it seems also important for managers to know about the credibility and reliability of advice emanating from particular actors; those at some remove and perhaps those with little service-delivery experience may do more harm than good.

These practice-relevant conclusions must be seen as tentative, and the patterns adduced here should be explored further in other studies. One fruitful avenue for additional research would be to test these results on a wider range of performance indicators. The majority of the research on strategic stance has been undertaken in the United Kingdom. This work has used aggregate or composite measures of organizational performance that encapsulate a number of performance indicators or a single measure of consumer satisfaction. Recent work by Meier and colleagues (Meier et al. 2007) suggests that different strategic stances are likely to benefit different aspects of the production processes. Under these circumstances a strategy of prospecting can have a positive impact on high-end performance indicators, as indeed can reacting. Therefore, it is plausible that different strategic stances will pay off in different ways. Similarly, we might find that the impact of networking with different actors is contingent on organizational context. While progress has been made here in unpacking the relationships between the alarm calls from different network nodes, strategy, and performance, clearly much work remains to be undertaken. In that sense, then, this paper is itself a wakeup call to catalyze further research on these and related questions.

Acknowledgments

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the International Research Symposium on Public Management in Potsdam, Germany, April 2–4, 2007. The authors acknowledge the Economic and Social Research Council (RES-062-23-0039) for its financial support. This paper is part of an ongoing research agenda on the role of public management in complex policy settings. That agenda has benefited from the helpful comments of Stuart Bretschneider, Gene Brewer, Amy Kneeder Donahue, Sergio Fernández, H. George Frederickson, Carolyn Heinrich, Peter Hupe, Patricia Ingraham, J. Edward Kellough, Laurence E. Lynn, Jr., H. Brinton Milward, Sean

Nicholson-Crotty, David Peterson, Hal G. Rainey, and Bob Stein on various aspects of this research program. Needless to say, this paper is the responsibility of the authors only.

Notes

1. Corporate officers include the chief executive officer, or head of paid service, and corporate policy directors with cross-organizational responsibilities for service delivery and improvement. Service officers include two sets of officers: First, there are chief officers who are the most senior officer with specific service delivery responsibility; they include the director of education and the director of planning. Second, there are service officers or frontline supervisory officers; they include head of school organization and planning and head of business efficiency.
2. In each authority surveyed, questionnaires were sent to up to three corporate officers, and up to 28 service officers—four across seven core services: education, social care, land-use planning, waste management, housing, library and leisure, and benefits services.
3. Independent sample *t*-tests were undertaken on five variables: population, ethnic diversity, deprivation, occupational mix, and age mix. No statistically significant differences between sample and population were found.
4. Major authorities include county councils, metropolitan boroughs, London boroughs, and unitary authorities. District councils, the tier of local government below county councils, were excluded from this study because there is no aggregate external measure of performance.
5. Strategy formulation was measured thus: *Rational Planning* (eigenvalue 1.85, 61.75 percent of variance explained): Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements: When the service/authority formulates strategy it is planned in detail; When the service/authority formulates strategy, options are identified and evaluated before the best option is selected; Strategy is made in consultation with our external stakeholders. *Logical Incrementalism* (eigenvalue 1.67, 32.71 percent of variance explained): Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements: The strategy with the greatest political support is usually adopted as our policy; When we make strategy we produce policy options which are very similar to those we already have; Strategy develops through a process of adjustment; Strategy develops through a process of bargaining and negotiation between groups or individuals.
6. Two measures of the level of need are included. The index of deprivation is the average ward score in each local authority area. It is the standard population-weighted measure of deprivation used by U.K. central government. The second measure is the number of lone parent households; it is a proxy for the capacity of lone parents to coproduce services because the time and money pressures on these households are likely to impede positive contributions to service delivery. The diversity of need facing a local authority is also likely to affect its performance because it increases the variety of needs to be met. Three measures of diversity were calculated as Herfindahl-Hirschman indices from the proportions of the various subgroups within each of the different categories identified by the 2001 national census within a local government area (e.g., ages 0–4, Black African). Factor analysis produced two factors: Factor 1, named *Deprivation* (eigenvalue 2.243, 44.87 percent of variance explained), included the ward index of multiple deprivation, social class mix, and single-parent households. Factor 2, named *Diversity* (eigenvalue 1.85, 36.94 percent of variance explained), included ethnic diversity and employment diversity.
7. There are no difficulties in our analysis arising from multicollinearity; the highest variance inflation factor is 2.27 and the average is under 2. Diagnostic tests, however, did reveal a number of outliers, and the results of White's general heteroscedasticity test confirmed the presence of nonconstant error variance for our ordinary least squares model. Therefore, robust estimation of the standard errors was used to reduce the effects of heteroscedasticity in the data set.
8. This pattern is very similar to that found in empirical work conducted in U.S. school districts. O'Toole and Meier consistently show that top managers'

interactions with elected school board officials are negatively related to performance (see, e.g., O'Toole, Meier, and Nicholson-Crotty 2005).

9. Conclusive evidence on our argument can only be confirmed by longitudinal data that would permit the use a Granger test of causality to identify the occasions when performance causes networking and when networking causes performance.

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