

# Government Process Management: A review of key differences between the public and private sectors and their influence on the achievement of public sector process management.

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## Abstract

There is increasing interest in process-based management. Business Process Management (BPM) is gaining acceptance as an effective, holistic management philosophy and practice. Much of the process management literature focuses on private sector organizations with inherent assumptions of profit-driven, tangible deliverables and well defined customer groups. This paper suggests nine key differences between the public sector and private sector, namely: public interest, accountability, political sensitivity, whole-of-government ecosystem, budget cycle complexity, information exchange, regulating society, machinery of government changes, and culture. It also considers, via a Force Field Analysis, how these differences influence the establishment and maintenance of BPM in the public sector.

[This paper was originally written for, and presented at, the BPM 2007 conference held in Brisbane, Australia in September 2007. In discussing the public sector it uses references to the Australian system of government (Westminster). BPM Practitioners from other countries will be able to substitute examples from their own government models. Other models of government practice may also suggest additional key differences. The full paper containing all of the endnotes and references is available from the authors on request.]

## Introduction

Today's citizens demand "*my government, on my terms*"(1). MyAmazon.com and other commercial equivalents have set a benchmark for the mass customization of the online and offline customer/citizen experience. A public sector equivalent, MyGovernment.gov, would be much more than online search and purchasing or the digitization of forms and brochures.

Two main motives drive the public sector to take a process view of its operations. One is the desire to make services as digital as possible, creating new, lower cost delivery channels. The ultimate public sector example will be a fully digital agency, and a contemporary example is online preparation and submission of tax returns, followed by automated assessment and electronic payment. The other key driver is a desire to improve service levels. Online voting and online purchase of electronic highway toll meters are future and current examples respectively. Clearly these two motivations are closely coupled and mutually supportive. Either or both of these goals drive e-government initiatives. Similar process-centric themes are also found in the private sector. Amazon and iTunes are examples of lower cost business models. Online banking is an archetypical example of enhanced customer service. However, research suggests that public agencies face more difficult challenges and that there are significant differences between public and private sector organizations in relation to the achievement of effective process-based management.

We argue that core differences between business and government environments give rise to unique circumstances across the public sector that support or constrain the achievement of successful, ongoing process management. In comparing Business Process Management (BPM) and Government Process Management (GPM), we are not suggesting differences in the essential concepts of Process Management (PM), but, rather, exploring the effect that the Business (B) and Government (G) environments have on achieving it.

Throughout this paper, references to particular government entities are from the Australian public sector unless the context suggests otherwise.

## Business Process Management

There are many definitions of BPM as illustrated by these three examples:

BPM *“is the discipline of modeling, automating, managing, and optimizing business processes throughout their lifecycle to increase profitability.”* (2).

*“The third wave of BPM is a fundamentally new approach to business process innovation and management”* that establishes *“a capability for implementing and managing a continuous stream of business process innovations.”* (3).

*“Business Process Management is a structured, coherent, and consistent way of understanding, documenting, modeling, analyzing, simulating, executing, and continuously changing end-to-end business processes and all involved resources in the light of their contribution to business improvement.”* (4).

Whether in the public or private sectors, the process management approach involves the documentation, ownership, ongoing management, and continuous improvement of business processes (5). Processes are the only way that organizations deliver value to customers and other stakeholders. In the frame of the private sector, the key motivation for business process management is to increase profitability and shareholder value via an improved focus on the customer experience and resource management.

## Government Process Management

The term Government Process Management (GPM) in this paper means the use of standard BPM principles and practices in the public sector environment.

Public administration has gone through many significant changes in the last two decades. The 1980s vision of “new public management” (NPM) introduced concepts such as purchaser/provider separation, market testing, performance-based remuneration, and the disassembling of large agencies into smaller more autonomous units. Dunleavy, et al., (6) argue, and we agree, that *“NPM is dead,”* increasing the potential for *“a more genuinely integrated, agile, and holistic government”* based on a new paradigm of Digital-Era Governance (DEG).

Dunleavy also suggests that moving away from the NPM concepts means that BPM is removed as a handicap to the development of citizen-centric public agencies. We disagree with this and suggest that genuine process-based management was never a handicap and is fundamental to the development of an accountable, transparent, and responsive public sector. Whether the operating paradigm is NPM or DEG, or any other construct, effective and ongoing BPM is a fundamental enabler both of high quality service delivery and cost control.

## Public and Private Differences

Nine key differences between public and private sector organizations are identified below. While several of these differences pose additional challenges, others offer the promise of a more proficient and widespread use of the process view in the public sector. The impact of these differences on the successful implementation of process-based management is discussed later in the paper.

### In The Public Interest

At the level of mission and vision, there is a basic difference between public and private sector organizations. Government agency missions have public interest elements. Using Australian Government examples, these will include goals such as to achieve *“better health and active ageing for all Australians,”* to *“defend Australia and its national interests,”* to assist *“people to become self-sufficient,”* and to support *“those in need.”* By contrast, private company success criteria require the creation of an environment where, for example, *“our shareholders are realizing a superior return on their investment.”* For-profit companies have objectives such as to *“deliver to our customers a better shopping experience”* or to *“provide our customers with the widest range*

*of home improvement products at the lowest prices everyday, backed with the best service.*" Public sector agencies exist to act in the public interest. They have mission statements that look to complex societal outcomes – outcomes that can be problematic to measure. Private sector companies have much more straightforward primary targets based on profitability and stakeholder value.

For the public sector there is an important overlay requiring agencies to cooperate for the public good. The success of public sector agencies is ultimately determined by the fulfillment of social objectives. Agencies must respond to a range of social and political pressures not applied to the private sector. For the core agencies of government, the main output is policy, or, at least, policy advice. This is harder to track than the physical production or financial returns measured in the private sector.

Public sector organizations deal with a more complex variety of "customers" than most private sector companies. Gartner suggests that *"citizens have a different relation with their government than with their bank and retailers. Most interactions take place to discharge administrative obligations, and to comply with rules and regulations."* In an exhortation to take pride in the service of the public, Dr Peter Shergold, Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet of the Australian Government, unequivocally provides a supporting perspective, *"I serve citizens not customers."* Whether public servants serve customers or citizens, and what they mean by those terms, is fundamental to public service culture and practice. In the process management context, the question is "to whom do our processes deliver value?" This question poses a unique challenge for many public sector agencies. For example, the Australian Sports Anti-Doping Agency (ASADA) has a mission to *"protect Australia's sporting integrity through the elimination of doping,"* Who are the "customers" of ASADA's processes? To whom do they deliver value? Many possibilities can be identified: drug-taking athletes, clean athletes, national and international sporting bodies, commercial users of ASADA services, pharmaceutical companies, sporting goods suppliers, sporting venues, the Australian Government, the responsible Government Minister, sports enthusiasts, the people (voters and taxpayers) of Australia, Australian society, and international society. This example highlights that public sector agencies must deliver a complex set of societal and pragmatic outcomes to an eclectic mix of people and organizations. By contrast, private sector organizations can more easily identify their customers and the value that they seek to receive.

There is a tension between the desire for open communication with the community and the need for protecting confidential and secret information. Customer information held by a private sector organization has usually been volunteered in some way. Information held by government about a citizen probably had to be provided. Public servants are also conscious of the potential for records to be made public via Freedom Of Information legislation, Parliamentary committees, and media reports. Private sector organizations also have a duty to protect confidential information. However, they seldom hold information able to impact national security and are generally far less exposed to the intense scrutiny experienced by public sector agencies.

A public sector organization can have a much greater effect on the lives of citizens than, for example, a bank or retail outlet. There is also the cumulative effect of multiple agencies contributing to an outcome. This puts agencies under increased and unique pressures to perform well individually and in aggregate as "joined up government." Podger (7) notes that *"the Public Service does have a particular responsibility for the public interest in ensuring due process: fair treatment of those affected by government decisions, transparency of decision making, careful and diligent management of programs, complying at all times with the law."* Some aspects of the due process requirement apply in the private sector but not with the same consequences or close scrutiny.

Shergold (8) encapsulates the key differences between the public and private sectors as follows: *"I serve citizens not customers. I do not market services to those who have the option not to buy. In delivering government programs to Australians I am also providing their rights and responsibilities, entitlements, and obligations. My responsibility is to the public not shareholders. For that profound reason public service is distinctive."*

### Public Accountability

The accountability of government agencies to justify the use of public funds is coming under increasing public scrutiny. Expectations go well beyond compliance with the rules. Pat Barrett, the former Australian Auditor-General, conveys the breadth of accountability stating, *"We are very conscious that virtually everyone in Australia has an interest in how well the public sector performs, in how well it achieves value for money outputs, and how accountable it is to the public and the taxpayer in particular. There is a high expectation of the public sector, quite rightly in my view, that it will have exemplary governance and administrative practices"* (9).

Scrutiny of public service decision-making occurs through a "network of integrity" via Parliamentary committees, the Australian National Audit Office, the Commonwealth Ombudsman, through Freedom of Information legislation, and administrative law. The costs associated with this are high. The Senate Standing Committee On Finance and Public Administration (Estimates) is one of the primary mechanisms for questioning the Government's financial management practices. In 2002 alone, approximately 650 hours of testimony and 7000 pages of evidence were provided to the Committee in Estimates hearings. Without entering the debate as to the value of accountability practices, these activities consume considerable resources.

Mulgan (10) emphasizes four key differences between public and private accountability. Namely that within the public sector: the structures of accountability are more stringent, there is continuous political scrutiny, the focus of accountability is wider, and there is no equivalent of Parliament as an institution for accountability in the private sector.

While managing risks is an important and routine part of both the private and public sector, Dr Ken Henry, Secretary of the Department of Treasury in the Australian Government, notes that it is the public sector that carries the burden for "macro" risks to the community such as foreign relations, defense, and quarantine. Tony Blair, the former UK Prime Minister, has suggested that the responsibility to protect citizens from these macro risks promotes highly risk adverse actions from public sector organizations in fear of public/parliamentary scrutiny. The public sector has additional risk management responsibilities over and above those of most private sector organizations and, as a consequence, acts cautiously and develops protective legislation, rules, and guidelines. Furthermore, the risk tolerance of a government varies through the election cycle. It would seem inevitable that the closer to an election, the lower the risk tolerance, and, during the caretaker/election period, there is virtually zero tolerance.

Performance management in the public sector encounters challenges related to multiple stakeholders and cross-portfolio objectives. Such challenges are not seen in the private sector. While financial accountability is relatively easy to demonstrate, it is harder for the government to demonstrate successful annual performance as most government policies and programs have a longer lead-time. Kouzmin, et al. (11), also confirm that the performance measurement in the public sector is more difficult than the private sector. While difficult, initiatives currently being undertaken in the UK suggest that measuring performance effectiveness and efficiency across the whole of government is possible. In 2003, a review of public sector efficiency was commissioned aimed at achieving ongoing efficiency gains of £21.5 billion per year by 2008. A 2005 UK National Audit Office report confirms £4.7 billion had already been achieved.

Government agencies are monopolistic, and benchmarking performance with competitors is often not possible. IP Australia and the Department of Defence are examples of Australian public sector agencies not subject to competition. Monopoly conditions inevitably influence the way public organizations think about, and respond to, citizen outcomes.

### Political Sensitivities

There is a story, perhaps apocryphal, of an Australian Government Minister who, after being earnestly told that he was his department's key customer, left no doubt about his view: *"I'm not your customer, I'm your boss"* Shergold supports this view: *"Within our system of democratic governance, born in Westminster, it is clearly intended to be the government not its public officials who decide on the national interest. It is the elected representative who is responsible to citizens, through the mechanism of secret ballots cast in elections. It is they, not their public officials, who*

can forfeit their jobs if they lose the confidence of the electorate.” Ministers have two major responsibilities. They are accountable for policy and management within their administrations and for discharging their portfolio obligations in the Parliament. When things go wrong for an agency, they can do so in very public ways with serious consequences for the Minister. Ministers are dumped without ceremony or compensation. In contrast, CEOs of private corporations might have their contracts terminated and move on with consoling financial payouts. Private sector CEOs change, but not with the same regularity. Neither are they subject to as much public opinion.

The political election cycle also has an effect on agency operations with the most obvious impact being a change of Minister. Each Minister is required to reapply for their substantive position as a Senator or Member at each relevant election. Change of government can also trigger changes in agency structures (see Machinery of Government Changes). Another election cycle impact is the “caretaker period” of government from when the Parliament is dissolved until a new government is appointed. During the caretaker period, ordinary business is conducted but no major policy decisions, appointments, or important undertakings are made.

Coupled with the political nature of an agency's senior authority figure is the condition that Shergold has called “*a babble of tongues persuasively arguing their cause with government.*” An agency gives advice but does not lobby its Minister. NGOs, lobbyists, governments, think tanks, associations, businesses, and citizens actively seek to influence government policy. In some circumstances, governments are lobbied by organizations on which they depend for aspects of policy development and service delivery. Private sector organizations receive representations about policies and practices, but not with the same level of intensity and consistency. They are more likely to lobby than be lobbied.

### Whole-of-Government Ecosystems

*“It is becoming increasingly the norm for (government) organisations to implement initiatives with the assistance of others”* (12). The “others” can be mixtures of public agencies at all levels, NGOs, private sector organizations, and citizens. The imperative for agencies to work together seamlessly for the public good is strong. Shergold of the Australian Department of prime minister and Cabinet notes that this was made apparent as *“we witnessed from afar the bureaucratic ineptitude which slowed the American response to Hurricane Katrina.”* Private sector supply chains are also complex but without the same multi-jurisdictional challenges or level of public scrutiny.

Whole of government working has been defined as *“public service agencies working across portfolio boundaries to achieve a shared goal and an integrated government response to particular issues. Approaches can be formal and informal. They can focus on policy development, programme management, and service delivery.”* Increasingly, organizational functional boundaries are seen as archaic by citizens who can book a world trip, including flights, accommodation, local transport, visas, theatre tickets, and restaurant reservations, while sitting at a computer. The Australian Government has a vision for public sector service delivery in 2010 that embraces the following aspiration: *“It will be easy for people to pinpoint the service or information they need, regardless of how or where they initially approach government: every door will be the right door when approaching government.”* There is no private sector equivalent of whole of government ecosystems in their potential for radical improvement, scale of operation, appetite for change, or the profound nature of consequential societal changes. The UK Government has committed to putting all government services on line. Saudi Arabia's e-government program has funding of SR3 billion (approximately US\$1 billion). Whole of Government / e-government is a massive global program.

Shergold underlines the fact that this is an objective that will not be easy to achieve: *“I believe firmly that the need to build a whole of government approach to policy development and delivery is the single most challenging issue we face in public administration.”* The challenges are greater than most cooperative initiatives in the private sector. A whole-of-government context changes the nature of working relationships, and, as a result, decision-making can be slow and complex. Agencies working in whole-of-government mode rely on consensus and influence to effect outcomes as they work in peer-to-peer relationships rather than command and control

hierarchies. Whole-of-government operation often means working in multiple jurisdictions shaped by national, State/Territory, and municipal party politics.

Governments around the world are looking to develop agile processes providing fast, flexible, and citizen-centric services in whole of government ecosystems. These initiatives are much greater in scope, scale, and impact than all but a few programs in the private sector.

### **Budget Cycle Complexity**

The annual budget of the Australian government has been described as its most important political, economic, and social document. The budget size highlights its influence over the economy. The total 2007-08 budget of \$247 billion covers the work of 18 departments and 111 agencies. Government spending in Australia accounts for more than a quarter of Australia's gross domestic product. The national budget process is also proscribed by law. Section 83 of the Australian Constitution states, "*No money shall be drawn from the Treasury of the Commonwealth except under appropriation made by law.*"

The Australian Government budget process takes seven months. Starting in November, it is finally delivered by the Treasurer in early May. The process involves the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, Treasurer, portfolio Ministers, Parliamentary Secretaries, Cabinet Committees and sub-committees, and Parliament as key decision makers. Departmental secretaries and their staff are also deeply involved in gathering policy, program, and financial data. There are 24 key components to the Budget Papers that compare, contrast, synthesize, and summarize the budget for public consumption. The delivery of the Budget Speech attracts both media and public attention in the quest to determine the perceived "winners and losers" of government focus and financial assistance.

In short, the budgeting activities within the private sector are not of the same order of magnitude as the highly coordinated, regulated, publicly scrutinized budgeting processes of the public sector.

### **Information Exchange**

Citizens and organizations interact with government for many reasons, including to access information, conduct transactions, participate in government, act in support of civil society, be subject to regulatory action, and to meet statutory requirements. Dealings with private sector organizations are mainly limited to the conduct of transactions and information access related to those transactions. Government agencies are the stewards of a "body of knowledge" about government policies and programs. Few private sector organizations have the provision of information as their primary task. Most government agencies have a significant requirement to create, manage, promote, and provide information services to the public. This increasing information exchange load is one of the key drivers for e-government. Complicating this picture is the fact that information required by a citizen is seldom in a single location or agency.

An increasing number of citizens prefer electronic government access. Delivery of information and services in electronic and automated forms benefits public agencies as well. A telling example of developments in information exchange involving the public sector is reported by Al-Kibisi, et al. (13), and Thompson (14). The Singapore import/export license application process used to involve 21 different forms, 15-20 elapsed days, and 23 different agencies. Today, applicants submit one online form and receive a license 15 seconds later.

### **Regulating Society**

That governments impose a regulatory burden ("red tape") on business and citizens cannot be denied. In Australia some 1400 agencies oversee the regulatory system throughout the three levels of government. Development, maintenance, and management of the regulatory environment is a uniquely government activity consuming considerable resources. Governments create regulations; private sector entities incur the costs, and benefits, of compliance. Submissions to the Australian Government's Reducing Regulatory Burdens on Business taskforce indicated that compliance matters may consume up to 25% of the time of company management.

The “red tape” burden applies also to the internal workings of public agencies because of the need for strong accountability. Internal “red tape” is defined as “*regulatory or administrative requirements that are unwarranted, ineffective or not the most efficient option for delivering the required outcome.*”

### **Machinery of Government Changes**

Machinery of Government changes (also known as Changes in Administrative Arrangements) in the Australian Government context are changes to public sector organization structures upon election of a new Government or at other times. Their purpose is to achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness across the public sector. Such changes can vary financial and legal instruments, reporting, taxation, superannuation, employee movement, staff entitlements, delegations, accommodation, and asset holdings. From July 1987 to October 1998 there were 11 such changes, and nine changes from 2002 to May 2007.

Surprisingly, there has been little research into the scope, scale, and impact of Machinery of Government changes. Notwithstanding, anecdotal evidence from public servants involved in the process suggests that the impact is significant.

Machinery of Government changes can require considerable and coordinated activity across multiple government portfolios. The scope, scale, and impact can be larger than restructuring or merger and acquisition efforts within the private sector. Further research into this issue would offer valuable insights.

### **Culture**

The importance of culture cannot be underestimated, as Schein (15) states: “*Culture matters because it is a powerful, latent, and often unconscious set of forces that determine both our individual and collective behaviour, ways of perceiving, thoughts patterns, and values. Organizational culture in particular matters because cultural elements determine strategy, goals, and modes of operating. . . If we want to make organizations more efficient and effective, then we must understand the role that culture plays in organizational life.*”

The characteristics of government organizations are typically described as having the presence of rules, procedures, structured hierarchies, formalized decision-making processes, a focus on conformity, and enforcement of rules, and are subject to political rather than market controls. Relative to their private sector counterparts, public sector organizations are usually less innovative and performances orientated, and are more risk adverse.

In the US it has been reported that public sector managers perceive or experience less flexibility in relation to personnel procedures, less job satisfaction, lower levels of job involvement, lower correlation with rewards and performance, less authority over personnel actions, and place a lower valuation on monetary incentives. A study into the culture of public sector organizations in the Australian State of Queensland found that despite public sector reform, cultural characteristics remained consistent with more traditional views of public administration. That is, they did not display flexibility, change orientation, goal setting, outcome orientation, efficiency, and productivity or employee participation and group cohesion.

Reflecting an established trend across government at all levels, the Department of Education and Training in the Australian State of New South Wales describes the changes required for improved performance. It acknowledges a need to move from an internal to external focus; from being driven by rules and regulations to being driven by values and flexibility; and from command and control management to that based on trust, responsibility, and accountability.

Shergold recently reinforced that all levels of the public service need “*to be aware of getting caught up in a culture of resistance.*” Executive staff should be at the forefront of change, encouraging more collaborative approaches. Managers need to lever creative and innovative ideas and contribute to a continuing process of organizational renewal.

Limited research indicates that public sector employees may have values and motives different from those of their private sector counterparts, in that “*public sector employees are more altruistic and have a commitment to social development and the pursuit of public interest.*”

In essence, it is reasonable to assert that, in general, the culture of the public sector can be more formalized, structured, risk adverse, and less innovative than the private sector.

### Process Management Implications of the Differences

We have proposed a gestalt of differences between public and private sector organizations. These differences must be considered in developing approaches to achieving process-based management in public sector organizations. It is problematic to simply transfer the private sector BPM experience to the establishment and ongoing commitment to GPM.

To assess the relative impacts of the identified differences, we use Kurt Lewin's Force Field Analysis (FFA) technique. FFA has been an influential technique in the fields of social and organizational science. It provides an approach to understanding behavior by mapping out the forces that influence behavior. Lewin suggested that every situation could be viewed as a field of forces whose balance creates the status quo. He further suggested that this balance was a state of "quasi-stationary equilibrium" because of constant changes in the forces. The forces are also interdependent, i.e., a change in one is likely to cause a change in one or more of the others.

Diagram 1 presents an FFA diagram of the implications for public sector process management stemming from the identified differences between public and private sector organizations. Central to the FFA diagram is the statement of the change target "Achieving successful, ongoing process-based management in public sector organizations." To the left are the forces that are likely to have a positive driving effect. To the right are arrayed the forces that are likely to restrain the achievement of the GPM goal. Of course, these are general assessments that would need to be tested in each particular situation.

In analyzing the "GPM field" in Diagram 1, we can see a number of instructive patterns. The driving forces have many elements that are supportive of the process view. Desirable public sector attributes such as due process, transparency, risk management, whole of government working, red tape reduction, and "machinery of government" change efficiency are all supported by GPM. Having clear documentation, ownership, ongoing management, and continuous improvement of processes would make these attributes more easily obtained and therefore should greatly support the case for GPM.

The forces restraining achievement of the goal relate to the inherent complexity of public sector management and the political environment in which it must operate. Complexity comes from the much more diverse "customer" spectrum, societal objectives, multi-jurisdictional operations, and cultural differences. The environment is made difficult by the need for public accountability and the electoral consequences of real or perceived failure.

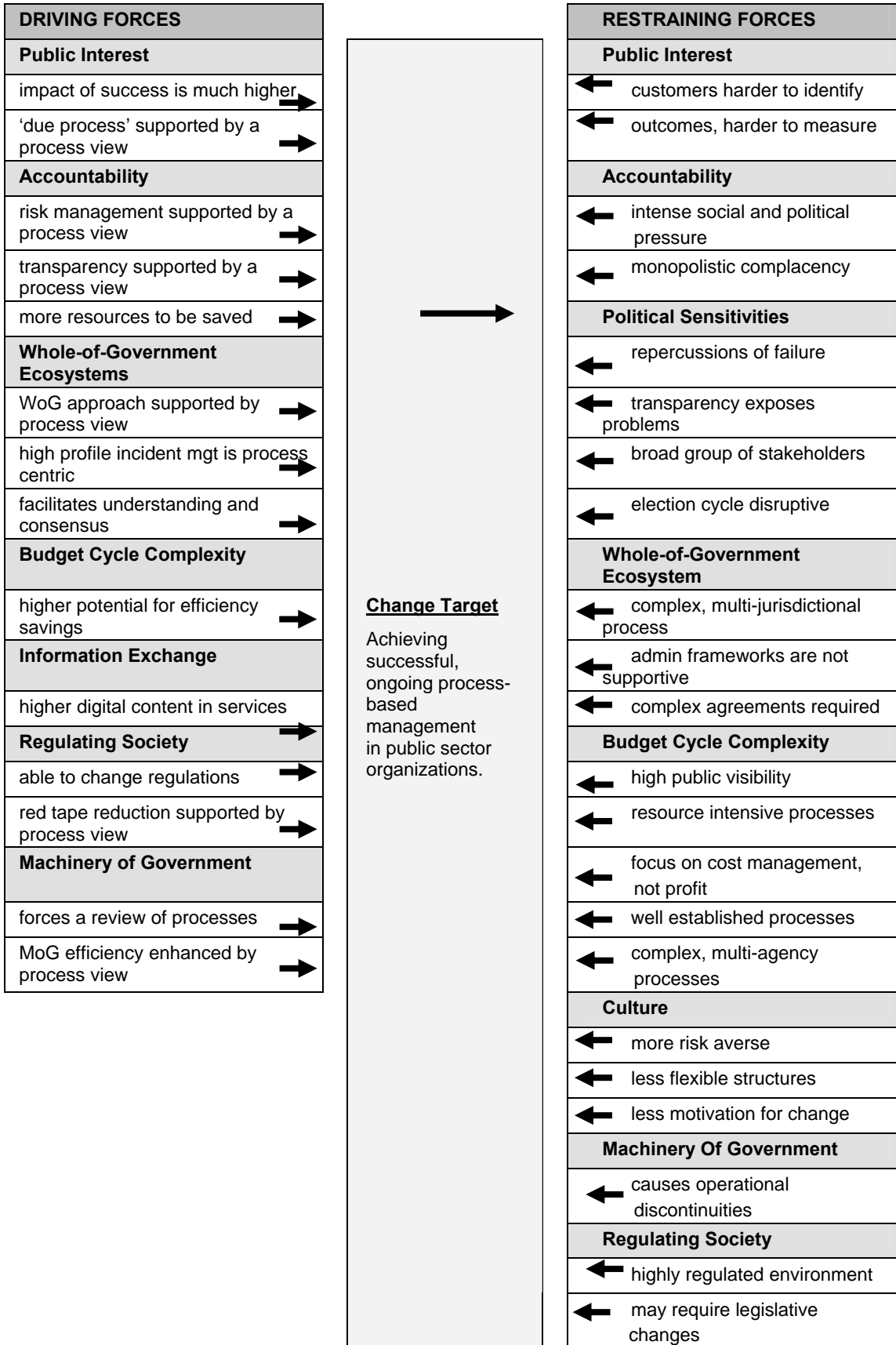
The forces driving GPM are significant and go to the heart of accountable, transparent, efficient, and responsive government. They provide a powerful motivation for pursuing process-based management approaches. As in the private sector, there is also a formidable set of forces that make difficult the achievement of successful, ongoing process-based management. That there are difficulties is not unique to the public sector; what is different is the nature of those difficulties.

Further assessment as to the impact these factors have on traditionally accepted BPM methodologies and change management practices needs to be conducted such that practical strategies for the application of GPM may be developed. It is envisaged that the development of such strategies may assist practitioners to more fully harness the "driving" forces and minimize the "restraining" forces at play in the public sector environment.

Also, further assessment as to the applicability of these distinguishing characteristics against the government models of other countries would be instructive.



Diagram 1. Force Field Analysis



**Change Target**  
 Achieving successful, ongoing process-based management in public sector organizations.

## Conclusion

We have demonstrated that in the Australian environment there are distinct differences between the public and private sector and that these broad contextualizing factors give rise to a complementary process management approach specific to the government sector, known as GPM (Government Process Management). While not yet validated by detailed action research, we believe that a fuller appreciation of these factors when undertaking process management initiatives in the public sector will greatly enhance the chances of achieving successful, ongoing process-based management.

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