Unit Three

POLICY-MAKING IN STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Part A  Patterns: Executives and Legislatures
         Chapters 11-15

Part B  Implementation of Policy
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Chief Executive Support and Innovation

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1. INTRODUCTION

Technological and managerial innovations are viewed as a primary means to improve the productivity and effectiveness of state and local governments (Perry and Kraemer, 1979). Large investments have been made in the development and diffusion of various physical and management technologies such as minipumpers, modular housing, team policing, and computerized assessment. These and other innovations have become a way for state and local governments to confront the dilemma posed by conflicting demands from the public for more and higher-quality services and lower taxes.

State and local government chief executives (e.g., governors, mayors, city managers) are perhaps the most influential participants in their organizations (Abney and Lauth, 1982); recent studies of technological innovation in local governments suggest that their influence in the adoption and implementation of innovations is no exception to this generalization. Chief executives interject themselves into the technological decision-making processes of line agencies (e.g., fire, police, and public works departments), stimulate line agencies to perceive performance gaps that might be closed by technological innovations, and provide moral and financial support for innovation adoption. Thus, although technological leadership is primarily a characteristic of specific line agencies within a government organization, Robert Yin and his colleagues from the Rand Corporation contend:

Although it is generally useful to analyze the activities of a police department or a public health agency as an autonomous organization,
such an agency is highly dependent on the general jurisdiction and
its "overhead" agencies and executives, e.g., the local legislative
body, the chief executive of the jurisdiction, and such related staff
offices as the budget bureau. (Yin et al., 1976:74).

At the outset of the chapter, it will be helpful to provide some definitions
so that the reader has a frame of reference for understanding the chief execu-
tive's role. First, when I refer to innovation I mean "the successful utilization of
processes, programs or products which are new to an organization and which are
introduced as a result of decisions made within that organization" (Rowe and
Boise, 1974:285). This definition is quite broad, but it conveys the central idea
that an innovation is something "new" that has been successfully and voluntarily
introduced to an organization. Using this broad definition, government innova-
tions may take many forms. As Donald Stone (1981:508) suggests: "They
[innovations] apply to objectives and policies, character of product or services,
hardware and software technology, procedure and process. They also involve
structure, management style and systems, external and internal relationships."

Second, it is important to be aware that innovation occurs over time and
can be divided into four stages (Eveland et al., 1977; Syracuse Research Corpora-
tion, 1977); preadoption, adoption, implementation, and incorporation. It is in
the preadoption stage that a state or local government becomes aware of a
problem or performance gap that requires attention. At the adoption stage, a
decision is made to choose among various solutions and whether to adopt a
particular solution. If a particular innovation is selected to conclude the
adoption stage, then it must be implemented in the next stage. Over time a
successful innovation will be used and accepted and thereby fully incorporated
into government operations.

This chapter focuses primarily on how the chief executive can promote
innovation by the design of important relationships inside and outside a state or
local government. It emphasizes the mechanisms by which state and local chief
executives direct and encourage subordinates to pursue their independent goals
and thereby facilitate the innovation process. For the sake of brevity and simpli-
city, the chapter takes essentially a positive approach to innovation by assuming
that the chief executive is competent, well informed, motivated by the broad
interests of the organization and the constituents served and, is interested in
facilitating change. The situation in any government jurisdiction will vary from
this ideal. In some instances, a chief executive's intervention will lead to
dysfunctions in the innovation process (Perry and Kraemer, 1977, 1980). For
example, the chief executive may support adoption of an innovation because of
anticipated power shifts, regardless of the organizational benefits generated by
the innovation (Dutton and Kraemer, 1977; Kraemer and Dutton, 1979;
Kraemer and King, 1976). Thus, the reader should be aware that how a chief
executive actually behaves may deviate considerably from the ideal type discussed.
II. CHIEF EXECUTIVE CONTROL OF THE INNOVATION PROCESS

There are three general ways in which a chief executive can influence innovation in an organization. One has the chief executive develop expectations among staff, clients, and constituents that support the innovation process. Another structures the organization’s climate to support and sustain innovative activity. A third provides the resources—political, technical, and economic—for the successful implementation and incorporation of innovations. Each of these avenues by which the chief executive can influence innovation is integral to success and can be characterized by unique tactics.

A. Staff, Client, and Constituency Expectations

For most employees and clients of state and local governments, the chief executive, together with the governing body and line department heads, are the most visible reference point. The chief executive’s actions can be powerful messages to employees that either generate bursts of creativity or as easily retard the development of new technologies or processes. The image the chief executive portrays to staff about innovation and change is, therefore, of continuous and genuine importance. As two local government participants, one a city manager and the other a technology coordinator, described the process:

The truth of the matter about innovation is that we do it all the time as we adjust to new demands and shifts in policies. And, probably the greatest innovators are our employees who adapt so well that they have figured out how to survive almost any social threat, city council, or administration. (Donaldson and Singleton, 1975:8)

And just as state and local government employees must continuously adjust internal processes to meet new demands and policies, clients and constituents must also adapt.

Whereas the chief executive’s importance as a communicator with these groups is evident, the tactics the chief executive employs in facilitating innovation are less well defined. As an “agenda setter” and gatekeeper” in the innovation process, the chief executive can influence both demand, by manipulating perceived performance gaps, and supply, by bringing new ideas to the staff’s attention. Among the tactics through which the chief executive alters the supply/demand perceptions of others are: leading the informal information system (Quinn, 1982), signaling support of innovation proposals (Bingham et al., 1981), and legitimizing new viewpoints among staff, clients, and constituents.

Effective chief executives develop informal networks with an array of organizational and extraorganizational individuals and groups to sense possible needs for change (Quinn, 1982). These networks are used by the chief executive
to overcome the filtering of information. Thus, state and local chief executives build relationships with other executives, interest groups, career civil servants, and business and university representatives.

State and local government chief executives have come to rely on professional associations, such as the International City Management Association (CMA) and the Council of State Governments, as important network elements. Jack Walker (1969), a political scientist, argues that such associations serve as information sources and policy cues and as "occupational contact networks" that expedite the transfer of personnel between jurisdictions. Bingham et al. (1981:15), citing earlier research by Dwight Waldo who characterized them as "hinge" institutions, make the case for the centrality of professional associations in the public sector innovation process: "Professional-specialist organizations...are part of whatever societal transformations are underway. Solutions to problems cannot be accomplished without their input. Public service professional associations are at the center of 'what's happening,' and must be so viewed."

The chief executive's professional association contacts help to: identify innovations for potential adoption; define performance gaps by comparisons with salient reference points; and, recognize possible future threats to the status quo. As a linking pin between the professional association and the organization, the chief executive integrates this information into the messages sent to employees, clients, and constituents, and the formal agenda set for the organization.

Of course, the chief executive is neither the only organizational member with professional association linkages nor the only initiator of change. When the chief executive is not the initiator, he or she must be aware of the need to facilitate the activities of others. Donaldson and Singleton (1975) suggest the chief executive must permit the staff to view him or her as their supporter when they take the initiative to innovate. Research also indicates (Bingham et al., 1981) that an elected or appointed chief executive's opinion about the importance of innovation is the primary determinant of a movement toward adoption, suggesting that the chief executive's support of change performs a significant gatekeeping function.

A logical extension of the chief executive's role in responding supportively to the ideas of others is that the chief executive also must actively work to make new ideas legitimate. For new ideas that entail significant uncertainties or concern, chief executives may seek to "create forums and allow slack time for their organizations to talk through threatening issues, work out the implications of new solutions, or gain an improved information bank that will permit new options to be evaluated objectively in comparison with more familiar alternatives" (Quinn, 1982:192). This type of activity by the chief executive may receive little notice, but it is a significant way of facilitating the generation, development, and acceptance of new ideas.
B. Creating an Innovative Environment

The stimulation of expectations and ideas for change requires systematic organizational support so that innovations are not prematurely rejected. The goal in creating an innovative environment is to institutionalize the innovation process and make it productive. Incentives must be created for organization members with new ideas to help them overcome resistance from opponents. Donaldson and Singleton describe this process as follows:

In any organization one will find a few people willing to attempt change, with others attempting to block such activity. For those who try to innovate there is often so little room to maneuver that their attempts are rebuffed and they fail. Thus, the manager is faced with making changes in the organization itself and the staff relationships if efforts to innovate are to succeed. (Donaldson and Singleton, 1975:9)

Three aspects of the organization’s climate that affect innovation appear particularly responsive to the chief executive’s influence. They are professionalism, technical competence of staff, and concern for results. Professionalism refers to a climate designed to sustain rational behavior, (i.e., largely structured, systematic, and coordinated) (Rowe and Boise, 1974). Professionalism embodies several attributes. It implies that organizational members are integrated with external professional communities and have relatively extensive channels for interpersonal communication. It also presumes a division of labor within the governmental unit with appropriate coordination among specialists and their roles. Finally, professionalism assumes orderly internal communications so that innovative ideas and proposals can be adequately conveyed. Although these attributes are not equally important at all stages, they would appear to be particularly important for the latter stages of adoption and implementation.

Each of these attributes of professionalism is largely under the chief executive’s control and therefore can be influenced in a variety of ways. Resources for and approval of staff participation in professional organizations is one means. A cursory review of a local government’s line-item budget will very quickly indicate whether the chief executive actively supports such linkages. The development of orderly communication may also include efforts by the chief executive to inform and update legislators, making them aware of the organization’s goals and preventing inadvertent sabotage of the innovation process.

Within the organization, the chief executive may encounter defensive responses to innovative proposals. Insight about the reasons for departmental defensiveness and parochialism is provided in a study by Pettigrew (1973) of the organizational politics surrounding a large-scale computer innovation. He argued that innovations invoke political behavior because they involve individuals or organizational subunits making claims against the current distribution
of organizational resources such as salaries, new equipment, information, or control over a new activity. An innovation may generate a demand for new resource allocations to an individual or subunit that has not previously been a claimant. And, consequently, other claimants might resist the innovation introduction because they see their interests threatened by a potential change in the current resource distribution.

The chief executive can minimize defensive behavior and encourage professionalism by balancing departmental and organizational perspectives. One means for achieving this balance is to develop incentive systems that reward and recognize the organizational perspective. Another means is through interdepartmental committees. Donaldson and Singleton offer an example of how committees operated in Tacoma, Washington:

Balance in the operating structure was accomplished by revising decision-making procedures. Extensive use of interdepartmental teams has drawn staff into interdepartmental decision-making and has encouraged reviewing of procedures. Innovative staff have the opportunity to legitimately introduce their ideas, and there is less chance of being rebuffed without reason. (Donaldson and Singleton, 1975:10)

In addition to promoting a professional climate, the chief executive must take the lead in assuring that the organization has an adequate reservoir of talented staff. The staff’s skill and experience is an important component of innovation (Perry and Danziger, 1980). Because the chief executive selects so many of the organization’s top personnel, he is directly responsible for the quality of key personnel and, indirectly, by his example and the decisions of subordinates, for many other appointments. Stone (1981:511) suggests that many executives fail in this activity because of “one of the deep-rooted human vanities ... the assumption that the competencies of prospects for a managerial post can be determined in a brief interview.”

A state or local government climate characterized by professionalism and a technically skilled staff is incomplete unless it includes concern for results. Performance norms within the organization are critical for innovation because they affect so many phases of the process. For example, performance expectations are necessary for triggering a performance gap at the preadoption stage and also for evaluating an innovation at the adoption phase. The chief executive’s leadership is central for creating a pervasive and constructive concern for results. In particular, the chief executive’s example of and support for meaningful performance evaluations of subordinates and subunits are important indicators of this concern.

As to the assessment of specific technologies, the chief executive’s concern for results also is critical. Because the chief executive needs to approve the initiatives of others, he or she must reserve judgment about the value of a
particular innovation until it can be shown to improve services or reduce costs (Kraemer and Dutton, 1979). Kraemer and Dutton describe as “faith” a chief executive’s support for an innovation that is offered independent of specific and identifiable benefits. They suggest that faith reflects deep sentiments about the value of a particular technology that are not easily depleted through disappointments with the technology. The chief executive’s failure to judge innovations objectively based on identifiable benefits and, more importantly, the failure to demand the same from subordinates, risk the adoption of unsuccessful and costly changes.

C. Resource Provider

Whereas the chief executive may be successful in setting an agenda for innovation and creating a supportive climate, most efforts to innovate will fail without a third ingredient—resources. These resources are not only financial, but technical and political as well. The chief executive’s primary role is to bring together the various coalitions needed to assure an adequate supply of resources. This is perhaps the most challenging of the chief executive’s roles. As Donaldson and Singleton (1975:10) note: “Our experience is that the extent of the need for not only resources, but for several types of resources, easily is underestimated.”

Coalition building is the central requirement of resource acquisition. Lambright and Flynn (1977) offer some useful insights about coalitions in local governments. They studied the adoption of fourteen technologies in the Syracuse/Rochester, New York area. They found that adoption of most of these innovations cost more than existing budgets could support, and the lead agencies therefore had to build coalitions to provide additional financial support from community, state, and federal sources.

Lambright and Flynn also found the ideal technological innovation coalition has two axes. One axis is intergovernmental and is based on state and federal officials as fund sources. Therefore, as outside promoters of innovation, they are generators of change within the local system. The second axis is community based and consists of citizen groups, interest groups, the media, suppliers, clients, and strategic employee groups.

The intergovernmental coalition is essential at the outset of the adoption phase of innovation. It is an important asset for bureaucratic entrepreneurs, such as department heads and bureau chiefs, in identifying performance gaps and innovative ways to deal with them. Once an innovation is adopted, however, the community-based coalition is a means for sustaining the innovation process through implementation and routinization. Bureaucratic entrepreneurs must forge alliances with suppliers, clients, and strategic employee groups to make sure that what is adopted will be implemented and used (Lambright and Flynn, 1977:116).
How does the chief executive influence these coalition-building processes? For particularly important or significant issues, the chief executive may lead the coalition. In Lambright and Flynn's Syracuse/Rochester study, for example, the Onondaga County executive led in championing adoption of a $50-million resource recovery plant by securing major grants from the state and federal governments.

According to Lambright and Flynn (1977), successful demonstration projects are among the most effective strategies administrative leaders can use to build coalitions. A demonstration project is a small-scale test of a proposed innovation. It is a way of establishing commitments of financial and other support from intergovernmental actors and of making a visible show of results for community members. Demonstrations are therefore helpful for building coalitions at relatively low cost and risk. They are useful for testing the technical feasibility of a new technology or process prior to a commitment to full-scale adoption. Demonstrations also reduce political risks because they are reversible if the results prove the demonstration to be a social or political liability.

Another way in which the chief executive may facilitate the development of coalition support for innovation proposals is to assist bureaucratic entrepreneurs within the organization (i.e., usually the heads of line agencies) in putting coalitions together. This may entail shifting slack resources to help overcome impediments to the creation or operation of intergovernmental or community-based coalitions. This commitment of support to an innovation coalition may extend throughout the innovation process, from the preadoption phase to incorporation. For example, from their experience in Tacoma, Donaldson and Singleton suggest that:

> Once agreement has been reached on a program, it is important for the manager to create a position on his staff dedicated to the implementation of the agreed program. . . . It becomes the job of the person in this position to utilize the staff, organization, and resource facilitation that the [city] manager has done to make the program work. (Donaldson and Singleton, 1975:10)

By creating a new staff position as part of the adoption of an innovation, the chief executive’s support continues into the implementation phase of the innovation process.

III. CONCLUSION

Although there is little empirical research in the area, anecdotal and case study evidence suggest that the chief executive plays a pivotal role in a state or local government’s innovation process. The chief executive appears to influence the innovation process in three ways: by developing appropriate expectations among
staff and constituents; by creating a supportive organizational climate; and by
providing adequate political, technical, and economic resources.

Even when the chief executive is successful in providing all these condi-
tions, there are still many other constraints that might sidetrack the process
(Feller and Menzel, 1977). The lack of appropriate technologies and legal
uncertainties are but two reasons why the process may fail even with the chief
executive’s support. However, despite the fact that the results are seldom
certain, active support from the chief executive can increase considerably the
probability that the innovation process will run its course.

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