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Evolving willingness and ability interfaces: An innovation led transformation journey

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses evolving willingness and ability during transformation initiatives in public sector organisations, a novel perspective contributing to addressing the need for better assessment and improved practice in managing transformation journeys. Propositions are formed by synthesising research, providing brief scenarios, and then through a summary narrative of transformation at a public sector organisation labelled PSO. A variation in willingness and ability levels and a divergence in these two variables across stakeholders comes across as an undercurrent to negotiate when the transformation is en-route. How it manifests is captured in propositions, providing a view of key interactions and consequences.

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1. Introduction

Since a decade and a half, there has been a significant increase in innovation led transformations in public sector institutions (Jenson and de Sousa Santos, 2018). In principle, such transformations are supposed to work upwards from systems and processes to then include change for aspects such as institutional dynamics and culture. Often, such sequential development stands compromised because the systems and process transformation effort meets barriers in up-ladder aspects like institutional dynamics and culture (Andrews, 2015; Cordella and Tempini, 2015). In recent times, innovative activity in the public sector has been enhanced given a thrust from the austerity mandate, and as a correlate, the focus is on efficient and effective use of public money. Because of mandate pressures, and unlike what has been typically associated with public sector transformations - seeking quick gains has become important. This makes the agenda even more strongly geared towards visible short-run efficiency and productivity gains, thereby being potentially less rigorous about addressing up-ladder aspects.

Change as an agenda has been oft distinguished between private and public organisations. The differentiating factors include the level of bureaucracy and the political context of democracy that relates with how organisations from either affiliation transact with their environment. New Public Management Reforms (NPM) and post NPM models both intend to

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reduce such differences in favour of superior outcomes from public sector transformations (Denis et al., 2015; Christensen, 2012).

New Public Management (NPM) and post-NPM doctrines have both been subject to extensive research (Denis et al., 2015, p. 282). One central difference is that the latter is pitched more in context of inter-organisational and wider stakeholder coordination. In the post NPM view, over-arching understanding of factors underpinning performance seems to be a concern "Big problems and tasks are seldom following organisational borders … there is a need for new steering mechanisms focusing on broad social outcomes to handle this challenge" (Christensen and Lægreid, 2011, p. 11).

Criticism of overtly siloed change initiatives at the National Health Service in the UK under the NPM model highlights that the variables a transformation is supposed to impact, often affect the transformation itself (Christensen, 2012). Such instances underline the importance of a deeper understanding of how such variables manifest-a trajectory this paper conforms to. Research examining public management reform in New Zealand, and with a strong criticism on how post-NPM actually takes forward the failings of NPM, provides further support for the positioning of this paper (Lodge and Gill, 2011; McNulty and Ferlie, 2004). The arguments here suggest that wider integration has taken away focus from underlying variables and oriented attention to drivers of integration and collaboration. From this perspective, in examining broader affecting factors, but in context of facilitating transformation, this paper is in sync with criticisms of both NPM and post-NPM doctrines.

The transformation case presented in this research note is situated in this context. It examines the case of a public-sector organisation PSO (pseudo name for confidentiality purposes) to examine an innovation led transformation initiative. We journey through this initiative to examine evolving willingness and ability across three primary stakeholders of: senior management; delivery team and; employees in the wider organisation as customers to the transformation. We find that willingness and ability levels evolve with performance signals during transformation to determine the progression and subsequent performance of the initiative. In how they form and re-form across stakeholders, divergence between willingness and ability for a stakeholder set and how it aligns with that for other stakeholders, seem crucial for momentum. Divergence at both levels suggest engaging multiple foci for change - including up ladder aspects noted before, as against niche focus to reduce divergence and consequently enhance momentum.

2. Innovation led transformations in the public sector

The growing body of research on public sector innovation has been reviewed time and again for understanding directions in which research follows and often orients practice (e.g. De Vries et al., 2016; Tummers et al., 2015; Sorensen and Torfing, 2011). Research referring to public sector innovation remains dominated by – administrative process innovations to improve effectiveness or efficiency, with environmental pressures being noted as the most dominant triggers (De Vries et al., 2016). Our reading of case studies of public sector innovation, particularly in the United Kingdom where our research site is based, clearly shows strong similarities in process and content (Moussa et al., 2018). The performance of transformation initiatives makes for a clear and emphasised need to improve conceptual framing and to introspect reasons behind the persistence of barriers encountered (Kuipers et al., 2014; Christensen, 2012).

Reiteration of productivity and efficiency concerns and their translation to action through programmes and stringent evaluation of existing narratives, often accompanies the aftermath of seminal events. For instance, change in government with a stated agenda for controlling deficit and improving performance. In the United Kingdom a prolonged downturn not really helped by episodes such as the Brexit vote and leadership changes, sets the context. Uncertainty that confronts the public purse in such settings comes to bear upon public spending very quickly, making efficiency and productivity through innovative transformations much emphasised key mantras guiding a significant body of research and policy initiatives (Cinar et al., 2019; LÊgreid, 2017; Burgess et al., 2017; Salge and Vera, 2012). These provide cues about how to action such initiatives that promise transformations through systems and process innovation with some associated impact on roles and structures. The need for research that works form an inside out approach, i.e. from a perspective that is more embedded in a public-sector unit or the whole of public sector, and less about imitating the market sector, has been emphasised alongside the crucial role of leadership in driving such changes (Potts and Kastelle, 2010; Borins, 2002). A parallel stream of work in collaborative innovation continues to promote and argue for public private partnership (e.g. Hagen, 2002). In either domain, whether embedded in the public-sector context to draw learnings, or analysing public, private and customer partnerships, the focus has been on analysing performance and antecedents thereof to conjecture good practices to evolve the transformation (Hicks et al., 2015; Fernandez and Rainey, 2006). In addition, the need for a broader conceptual framing – a gap noted before, what has also been given less attention is how organisational response to the sector agenda is formed in relation to the experience of transformation efforts. We contribute to addressing this gap by conceptually framing the transformation journey. The paper provides a perspective on divergence in stakeholder uptake-to draw implications for how the transformation plays out and to what effect.

It has been empirically established that two important factors affect public sector transformation more strongly than transformations in private sector organisations. The first of these is 'organizing arrangements', i.e., bureaucratic schemas including structures, procedures and also reward systems. These 'arrangements' are considered in such research as much more rigid in public sector organisations (Robertson and Seneviratne, 1995). This makes any adaptation to changes in willingness and ability levels slower and more difficult, thereby allowing misalignment between the two variables overall, and also across stakeholders. The second factor noted is that in public sector settings, workplace improvements do not easily flow through from transformation performance. This affects the perceptual and behavioural forming associated with willingness

and ability-making them inadequate for maintaining transformation momentum. The insufficiency in managing transformation journeys because of these organizing arrangement rigidities, and difficulty in easily mirroring performance of the transformation in workplace improvements continue to be noted in recent research (van der Voet et al., 2015; Lewis, 2019). Such research also notes stakeholder diversity and variation in uptake between stakeholders. We find this progressive and reiterated emphasis from accounts of transformation initiatives quite compelling. For us it has fuelled our interest in studying the undercurrents of willingness and ability across stakeholders during a public sector transformation initiative.

3. Conjecturing evolving willingness and ability over a transformation initiative

Willingness and ability as a coupling underlying behaviours and responses have been deployed in numerous research contexts. The list is led by the idea of willingness and ability to pay in health and economics, and in human development and poverty alleviation studies (e.g. Jha and Bhalla, 2018; Mataria et al., 2006; Reddy, 1999). As platform ideas to explain and investigate, this coupling has informed studies in other domains as well - such as marketing and in operations management, to name a few (e.g. Kannan and Tan, 2002; Pullins, 1996). We therefore do not claim to limit it in relevance to the domain of innovation or transformation, or public sector organisations, as under purview here. The intent is to deploy it as a platform to model the phenomenon in context.

Willingness to be onboard for an intervention, is typically split into willingness to accept and willingness to pay in socio-economic studies (Alozie and McNamara, 2013). From a broader perspective and by extension, it can also be thus seen to be about having a favourable intent for supporting and facilitating an intervention (willingness to accept), and/or being keen to take on responsibility and accountability (willingness to contribute more explicitly). This is a view that can be taken for assessing willingness in relation to transformation initiatives within organisations. Ability on the other hand for such change is about being capacitated at the individual, group and systems level to engage and help execute the intervention.

Let's look at the transformation journey in a public sector organisation from this vantage point. Typically, there is a likelihood for a fair level of initial willingness in the senior management, partly induced by political pressure, to align with the wider public-sector mandate for change (Andersen and Jakobsen, 2018). Overtime, this willingness might change contingent on factors like top leadership commitment and resourcing, and performance experience of design and implementation (Hambrick et al., 1996). Ability to deliver the change will often stand evaluated by how the initiative transpires in terms of the organisation being able to design, absorb, own and see benefits (Nicholls, 1984).

The impact on willingness to progress the transformation will be different across: employees as customers to the transformation; delivery team and; senior management. Poor or less than expected benefits and difficulty in adapting may see a drop-in willingness levels of employees and the delivery team may also get discouraged. The ability of the delivery team may come under question in such a scenario. Depending on the strength of intent to see the transformation through in the senior management (a marker for willingness), ability enhancement measures maybe put in place for the delivery team alongside sensitization efforts for the wider set of employees-invariably directed at negotiating cultural rigidities and institutional dynamics. Ability and willingness levels may thus suggest a certain way of calibrating the transformation initiative for superior gains.

This illustrative outline of performance impact is simplistic in not bringing into play other outcome-effect combinations like leadership issues and political agendas that could affect realised performance (Siebert, 2019). The paper acknowledges these but does not explicitly draw observations and evidence for these as the interpretative biases in the immersive context of the study are likely to be strong. The approach for generating observations underpinning the paper, and observations are provided later. For now, let us continue to discuss logics behind how willingness and ability manifest using illustrative scenarios.

There is a likely variation in willingness and ability levels between stakeholder groups, and difference between willingness and ability levels for each stakeholder group. For instance, say the delivery team has its abilities enhanced through experience of the first phase of the initiative in collaboration with an outsourced provider. As a consequence of enhanced abilities, the team then seeks to bring development and implementation completely in house at a certain stage, while the senior management is keen to get continued support from external partnerships given the good performance. This thus creates a misalignment in ability and willingness levels between stakeholders. In other words, high ability and high willingness in the delivery team but low willingness despite high ability to provide sanction in the senior management team. Once again this is a call to action for negotiating a transformation performance-based misalignment between institutional stakeholders.

For employees also, the willingness and ability interface could be positioned in different ways. For instance, the ability to absorb and adapt to changes maybe high but willingness may be low due to uncertainties about say potential reduction in personnel once new technology enhancements automate processes. This third stakeholder set – that of employees may also be aligned towards one or the other source based on their experience - in the delivery team example, this would be a with a choice between external support and a completely inhouse transformation team. If this is not aligned with senior management belief and action for choosing either or a collaborative mix of certain type, willingness levels may drop. Political equations, power exercised by champions of the delivery team/unit and their own legitimacy of course come into play as mediating influences, as noted before (Schraeder et al., 2005). Also, if a conflict between delivery team's thinking and senior management preferences comes to the fore, both willingness and ability for uptake by employees may suffer. Clearly at this point, another perspective on ability that of senior management and leadership - to mobilise organisational commitment and to achieve alignment with the delivery team's aspirations and confidence, becomes the focus of attention (Young et al., 2012).

A central variable affecting both willingness and ability is quite clearly past performance (Jha and Bhalla, 2018). Past performance is called upon for determining how initiatives gather momentum or change direction - whether it is immediate past performance or the trajectory of performance over time, consequences of performance experiences are recognised across the board, and moderated by different contextual aspects for different stakeholders - like institutional dynamics, structural inertia and aspirations, to name a few. Longitudinal analysis of transformation at PSO delivers strategic insights into how decisions get affected by performance signals. This then dwells into a more nuanced understanding of how stakeholders' willingness and ability contexts vary and to what effect.

As an initial stab, the interplay of willingness of ability at the macro organisational level without involving the different stakeholders can be visualised in Fig. 1. The long run and short run demarcations are important to note. In the short run willingness will shape investments and pursuits for ability enhancements. In the long run if there is with continued superior performance, the demands from ability enhancements will also become higher. It is reasonable to assume that aspirations rise faster than ability levels with superior performance (Festinger, 1954). On the other hand, as discussed, when performance drops in the short run there will be a lack of willingness to deploy the same source of ability going forward. In the long run, with sustained poor performance and despite exploring alternative sources for ability enhancement; it is likely that senior management will try to coat tail sector trends as a tick box requirement.

4. Approach for developing the 'journey' narrative

The illustrative framework above is followed by a summarised longitudinal narrative of evolving willingness and ability levels. The data comprises observations recorded by one of the authors. Observations have been drawn from open discussion forums, and electronic blogs/discussion boards to which access was granted. However, this data was initially collected to examine barriers to innovation-not really directed at evolving willingness and ability. A three-level template analysis to identify key systemic internal and external barriers to public sector innovation was generated. The levels covered were strategic, operational/procedural and behavioural interactions. Several central barrier nodes were identified, and interactions modelled. For instance, funding barriers, innovation champion turnover, middle management inertia, among others.

The willingness and ability context came forth as an underlying aspect only after discussions on causality. The interaction between and emphasis across the barrier nodes changed over time and the reasons were often in realised performance, where the enaction of performance feedback could be seen to affect changes in willingness and ability levels. We associate with the notion of a 'processual framework' where the importance of working in an immersive context (one author) for

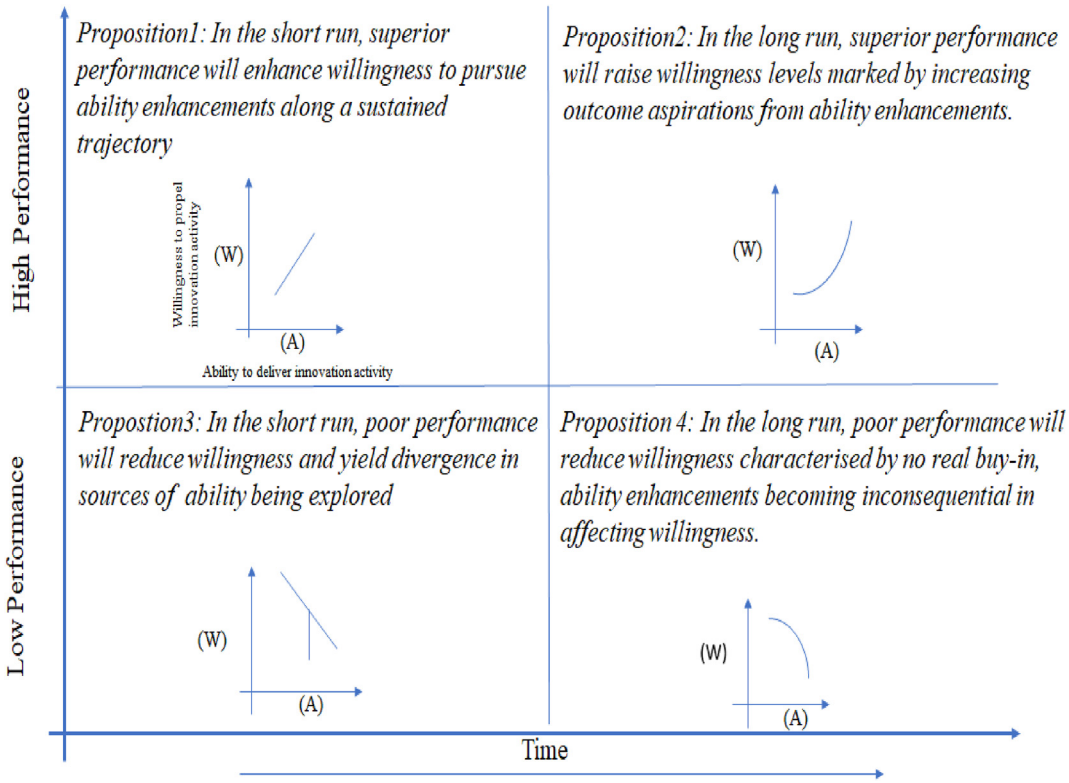

Fig. 1. Organisational level perspective: Willingness and Ability overtime - Mediation by performance in Public sector innovation initiatives.

analysing organisational change and then taking the interpretative synthesis to deep dive outside the context is advised (i.e., as here, other authors involved in framing the narrative not being part of the immersive context) (Dawson, 1997). Furthermore, the "focus is not on working the data to strengthen the generalisability of the findings but rather, to provide narrative accounts of the continuously developing and complex dynamic of people in organisations. Although general trends can be identified and typical responses recounted, under the processual framework, one is significant" (Dawson, 1997, p. 401).

The reflections were supported and validated in part by organisational reporting of the progress of this initiative from 2012 to 2018. Direct quotes or naming of personnel has been avoided for reasons of confidentiality. The study has already provided feedback to PSO in late 2018.

5. Journey through a public sector transformation initiative

An internal baseline study was conducted in 2012 to explore trajectories for pursuing the transformation agenda of superior efficiency and productivity. This was synchronised with the austerity mandate under change as 'innovation and digital transformation' at PSO. The implementation of in-house recommendations received varying support - not as much because of lack of willingness but because of change in leadership positions within senior management. The customers of change i.e. the PSO employees demonstrated considerable inertia given entrenched methods and processes they were used to. This then required careful reselling of the transformation agenda after an initial lack of reception. At this point willingness in senior management became marked with more caution, if not reduced. There was sanction for external partnerships to recalibrate the initiative but with a rather conservative budget. Overall, lack of initial uptake, as a marker for willingness in one stakeholder set potentially reducing willingness as a function of risk perception in another. Clearly, demonstrating interaction between willingness levels across stakeholders.

Initial willingness in the senior management and leadership was triggered by a government push for public service performance uplifts through transformation productivity, staff engagement and automation. This was to also meet aspirations of long-term savings in public - spending. But with low reception of the initiative, senior management willingness confronted a perception of low ability to see it through – attributed mostly to the delivery team. There was no evaluation of the team's activities, only of the uptake in the employee set. The solicitation of external partners indicated a propensity to work on external legitimacy. This was preferred over supporting abilities of the internal delivery team by focused review and feedback, and also instead of investments in senior management led sensitization to push up willingness levels.

Proposition 5a. *When initial willingness meets below par performance, organisational ability to deliver may stand compromised due to external legitimacy seeking behaviour of the senior management.*

Proposition 5b. *The need to reassure senior management for preventing a sharp drop in their willingness, may conflict with support required for ramping up willingness and ability of other stakeholder sets.*

Things changed in the senior management team in late 2013 with strong personalities leaving the organisation. It was also marked by a poor hand over of the leadership baton for the initiative and poor emphasis or establishing proper lines of communication. This view of the handover was also widely shared by employees, willingness dropped across all stakeholders. Interestingly this was potentially somewhat less of a drop for the delivery team. The reason being their involvement in ability enhancements through external partnerships, and very positive experience thereof, despite initial apprehensions. The partnerships drew on both external systems' providers and change consultants with strong credentials from being involved with other transformation initiatives in the public sector. Enhanced ability in the delivery team through these but low willingness overall was not giving the initiative a chance to bounce back strongly. Budgets became tighter and internal re-engagement processes initiated by the delivery team became crucial for the initiative to survive let alone regain momentum. The re-engagement was essentially driving at willingness in employees and in senior management to allow enhanced abilities of the delivery team to get some traction.

Proposition 6. *While leadership slack felt by employees will dampen momentum, perceptions about enhanced ability in delivery could just about keep the initiative afloat.*

Minor trials in 2014 and 2015 showed real potential through strong efficiency results. However, the desire for a bigger trial that would fundamentally tackle major transformation needs identified waned. This was because senior management now questioned the speed. Doubts were raised about in-house skills and abilities to handle such upscaling so soon. The approach promogulated was to hold off tackling difficult barriers identified and to stick with low risk ability support, essentially what was purchase of ability support or 'purchase innovation', albeit with a careful eye on costs. The faith in outsourced input remained firm after this relatively more 'performing' period. Effective support through external parties in the past was highlighted to validate this strategy.

Proposition 7. *Superior performance through external support for ability transformation will facilitate momentum. However, it may also infuse caution in willingness demonstrated by senior management to internalise the initiative going forward.*

The delivery team continued to display benefits of scaling up to influential senior managers (even if they did not want to see it) and directly approaching the executive committee members highlighting the saving potential in internalising the transformation delivery i.e. the promise of allowing the internal delivery team more autonomy and break away from external

support after a couple of years of such support. There was anyway ever lower budget allocation for external support - 'not' upscaling would not yield the desired savings to offset costs. By working an argument that any upscaling trial would be only utilising existing resources, persuasions led to some like-minded senior management personnel to eventually prevail despite overall low willingness for this in the senior management.

Proposition 8a. *Willingness is one stakeholder set is often crucial for allowing ability and willingness levels in other stakeholders sets to be of consequence*.

Proposition 8b. *To negotiate low willingness as a barrier, it may be useful to work on more receptive factions within a stakeholder set. This is so as to bundle its willingness with that of other stakeholders. It can often shape critical mass by circumventing overall low willingness in a given stakeholder set*.

In late 2016 and 2017 with some demonstrated ability to engage employees, smaller teams from the delivery unit were formed. However, once again through the loss of key staff and senior management champions over 2017 and 2018 there was a loss of momentum. The initiative was positioned precariously but with some upscaling, and some wider organisational buy in. It is a roller-coaster ride where losing thrust on the climb could have equally disastrous consequences as when momentum is not controlled going downhill.

6. Discussion

Propositions in this paper relate to how willingness and ability evolve based on performance feedback at the organisational level and across stakeholder groups. We draw some focused evidence from research, present illustrative scenarios and then present a narrative of a transformation initiative in a public sector organisation. From the latter four propositions a need for alignment is evident, not only between willingness and ability levels, but also in how they may be oriented differently for different stakeholders. If not converged such deviation will dilute momentum. A transformation initiative looking at all foci i.e. governance, institutional dynamics, agency and processes, and roles and identity may help reduce misalignment and divergence in willingness and ability. Transformations that work in isolation of one or the other foci noted may create an imbalance that will difficult to correct en-route. For instance, governance and institutional dynamics were not part of the transformation at PSO. Focus on operational processes, systems transformation and associated recalibration of roles seems to encounter barriers stemming from institutional dynamics, governance and leadership aspects. In the case of the transformation at PSO, a roadmap of the initiative to allocate resourcing over the life of the transformation, timescales, and options - contingent on outcomes with clear autonomy and control levels, were rather poorly worked in and senior management turnover did some damage. This transpired into some clear misalignment between willingness and ability interactions across and within stakeholder groups, amplifying the impact of barriers where this misalignment was potentially a source of, or underpinning the barriers. Such an approach of deeper causality diagnosis may provide food for thought to researchers and practitioners interested in organisational transformation, and in seeking answers for course correction to deliver superior performance.

7. Conclusions

We would like to re-acknowledge that the willingness and ability framing could be, as has been, appeal to a variety of contexts, including transformation narratives not limited to public sector organisations. The study findings may thus find interest beyond public sector organisations but at the same time the conjectures drawn in this paper may align relatively more closely to the context of transformation in public sector organisations-given the narrative here, and characteristics of the organisation that influence it. The classical understanding of the contrast between public sector and the private sector is that the former can 'typically' be less risk averse as public accountability in the larger political and economic landscape stands much diffused. Private sector organisations on the other hand, have greater performance delivery pressures. By the same token, propensity to take risk may imply greater momentum in public sector organisations for innovative transformation. However, here comes the context - the idea of innovation being led by stronger and larger undercurrents like the 'austerity drive' as for PSO in the paper. This makes innovation too goal directed and confined in terms of resources. Furthermore, the need for legitimising the spending of public money, and not being below par to sector performance under a given mandate, is stronger than revelling in novelty and in outperforming other organisations in the sector. Creation of public value thus being marked with more conservatism than creation of value. Overall thus, the verdict aligns with performance narratives of tedious poor public sector innovation.

For this study, it demonstrates why the conjectures may hold more strongly for public sector transformations. Institutional dynamics, and negotiating rigidities are more at liberty to play out the idea of value in satisfying stakeholder perceptions and preferences, than value creation from innovation, which is inherently scoped from a very long-term outcome perspective. Willingness and ability deviances and conflicts along the transformation journey thus become stronger rogue variables to manage in public sector settings. There are other aspects to do with the nature of leadership demonstrated by senior management and senior management stability that have been of strong consequence in the narrative. These could be examined in future research that has stronger data; i.e. say, observations from more than one organisation to work with. Overall, alignment in willingness and ability, and consequences thereof, remain an undercurrent that speaks strongly to the

understanding of a public sector transformation journey. We believe that our attempt to examine this journey will fuel research interest and inform practice strategies for managing innovation led change in public sector organisations. This is also as topical an agenda as it gets - particularly in these times when change is upon us due to the unfortunate Covid-19 scenario. Making innovation lead such change for focused and aspired for outcomes is a challenge as never before.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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