

**Evolving willingness and ability interfaces: An innovation led transformation journey**

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SCHOLARONE™  
Manuscripts

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5 **Dear Reviewers,**

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7 **Thank you for the sharp and much useful feedback for our paper. We have responded**  
8 **in a focused manner and made changes to uplift the paper.**

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10 **Your advice and guidance have been very gratefully received.**

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14 **Many thanks**

15  
16 **Best wishes**

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18 **Authors**

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21 **REVIEWER 1**

22  
23 **Comment**

24 **This paper is overly vague in its theorizing. The concepts of ability and willingness need**  
25 **to be detailed with more precision. I also am sceptical that the authors' theory had**  
26 **particular relevance to public organizations.**

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31 **Response:**

32 Thank you for your comments. We have now positioned our theorisation with more  
33 robustness. This has been greatly helped by your suggestion of elaborating the willingness  
34 and ability concepts with more precision and in context.

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38 The relevance to public sector organisation is in context of the narrative here and we  
39 acknowledge this clearly. We agree that willingness and ability as platform concepts are  
40 widely used and the conjectures in this paper are to that extent may also appeal more widely.

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42 The relevance to public sector organisation is in context of the narrative here and we  
43 acknowledge this clearly. We agree that willingness and ability as platform concepts are  
44 widely used and the conjectures in this paper are to that extent may also appeal more widely-  
45 we note this and also re-acknowledge this in conclusions.

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50 On page 7 – first two paragraphs (as highlighted)

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54 *“Willingness and ability as a coupling underlying behaviours and responses have been*  
55 *deployed in numerous research contexts. The list is led by the idea of willingness and ability*  
56 *to pay in health and economics, and in human development and poverty alleviation studies*  
57 *(e.g. Jha and Bhalla; 2018; Mataria et al., 2006; Reddy, 1999). As platform ideas to explain*  
58 *and investigate, this coupling has informed studies in other domains as well - such as*  
59 *marketing and in operations management, to name a few (e.g. Kannan and Tan, 2002;*  
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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.”

In Conclusions – page 16

“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.”

## REVEIWER 2

### Comments

**This is a fairly accomplished paper. It is well grounded in extant research, its research strategy and methodology is acceptable and it offers identifiable conclusions. The paper is intended to contribute to a stream of research in the field of public administration/public sector management. As such, it is rather pragmatically oriented.**

**I would recommend the following:**

- 1. New Public Management Reforms (NPM) and post NPM models could be discussed a bit more upfront where they are noted or later – just to highlight their remit and to better position the context and contribution of this paper**
- 2. The discussion could succinctly and critically relate with some other public sector interventions.**

### Response:

Thank you for your comments. They have been very useful in developing this paper. With reference to discussion on NPM and NPM models we now provide this in an enhanced manner to also position the paper. This has been very useful to do for explaining how this paper meets research in this domain.

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3 In doing so we managed to embed examples of interventions in a succinct manner as advised.  
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5 On Page 3:  
6

7 *“New Public Management (NPM) and post-NPM doctrines have both been subject to*  
8 *extensive research (Denis, Ferlie, and Van Gestel 2015:282). One central difference is that*  
9 *the latter is pitched more in context of inter-organizational and wider stakeholder*  
10 *coordination. In the post NPM view, over-arching understanding of factors underpinning*  
11 *performance seems to be a concern “Big problems and tasks are seldom following*  
12 *organisational borders .....there is a need for new steering mechanisms focusing on broad*  
13 *social outcomes to handle this challenge” (Christensen and Lægreid, 2011, p. 11).*  
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15  
16 *Criticism of overtly siloed change initiatives at the National Health Service in the UK under*  
17 *the NPM model highlights that the variables a transformation is supposed to impact, often*  
18 *affect the transformation itself (Christensen, 2012). Such instances underline the importance*  
19 *of a deeper understanding of how such variables manifest- a trajectory this paper conforms*  
20 *to. Research examining public management reform in New Zealand, and with a strong*  
21 *criticism on how post-NPM actually takes forward the failings of NPM, provides further*  
22 *support for the positioning of this paper (Lodge and Gill, 2011; McNulty and Ferlie, 2004).*  
23 *The arguments here suggest that wider integration has taken away focus from underlying*  
24 *variables and oriented attention to drivers of integration and collaboration. From this*  
25 *perspective, in examining broader affecting factors, but in context of facilitating*  
26 *transformation, this paper is in sync with criticisms of both NPM and post-NPM doctrines”.*  
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# **Evolving Willingness and Ability Interfaces: An Innovation Led Transformation Journey**

## **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.

## Introduction

Since a decade and a half, there has been a significant increase in innovation led transformations in public sector institutions (Jenson and 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 reduce such differences in favour of superior outcomes from public sector transformations (Denis, Ferlie, and Van Gestel 2015; Christensen 2012).

New Public Management (NPM) and post-NPM doctrines have both been subject to extensive research (Denis, Ferlie, and Van Gestel 2015:282). One central difference is that the latter is pitched more in context of inter-organizational 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.

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3 Research examining public management reform in New Zealand, and with a strong criticism  
4 on how post-NPM actually takes forward the failings of NPM, provides further support for the  
5 positioning of this paper (Lodge and Gill, 2011; McNulty and Ferlie, 2004). The arguments  
6 here suggest that wider integration has taken away focus from underlying variables and  
7 oriented attention to drivers of integration and collaboration. From this perspective, in  
8 examining broader affecting factors, but in context of facilitating transformation, this paper is  
9 in sync with criticisms of both NPM and post-NPM doctrines.

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

### 37 **Innovation Led Transformations in the Public Sector**

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

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

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29 It has been empirically established that two important factors affect public sector  
30 transformation more strongly than transformations in private sector organisations. The first of  
31 these is ‘organizing arrangements’ i.e. bureaucratic schemas including structures, procedures  
32 and also reward systems. These ‘arrangements’ are considered in such research as much more  
33 rigid in public sector organisations (Robertson and Seneviratne 1995). This makes any  
34 adaptation to changes in willingness and ability levels slower and more difficult, thereby  
35 allowing misalignment between the two variables overall, and also across stakeholders. The  
36 second factor noted is that in public sector settings, workplace improvements do not easily flow  
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3 through from transformation performance. This affects the perceptual and behavioural forming  
4 associated with willingness and ability- making them inadequate for maintaining  
5 transformation momentum. The insufficiency in managing transformation journeys because of  
6 these organising arrangement rigidities, and difficulty in easily mirroring performance of the  
7 transformation in workplace improvements continue to be noted in recent research (van der  
8 Voet, Kuipers, and Groeneveld 2015; Lewis 2019). Such research also notes stakeholder  
9 diversity and variation in uptake between stakeholders. We find this progressive and re-iterated  
10 emphasis from accounts of transformation initiatives quite compelling. For us it has fuelled our  
11 interest in studying the undercurrents of willingness and ability across stakeholders during a  
12 public sector transformation initiative.

### 21 **Conjecturing Evolving Willingness and Ability over a Transformation Initiative**

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

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

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43 Let's look at the transformation journey in a public sector organisation from this vantage point.  
44 Typically, there is a likelihood for a fair level of initial willingness in the senior management,  
45 partly induced by political pressure, to align with the wider public-sector mandate for change  
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3 (Andersen and Jakobsen 2018). Overtime, this willingness might change contingent on factors  
4 like top leadership commitment and resourcing, and performance experience of design and  
5 implementation (Hambrick, Cho, and Chen 1993). Ability to deliver the change will often stand  
6 evaluated by how the initiative transpires in terms of the organisation being able to design,  
7 absorb, own and see benefits (Nicholls, 1984).  
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12 The impact on willingness to progress the transformation will be different across: employees  
13 as customers to the transformation; delivery team and; senior management. Poor or less than  
14 expected benefits and difficulty in adapting may see a drop-in willingness levels of employees  
15 and the delivery team may also get discouraged. The ability of the delivery team may come  
16 under question in such a scenario. Depending on the strength of intent to see the transformation  
17 through in the senior management (a marker for willingness), ability enhancement measures  
18 maybe put in place for the delivery team alongside sensitisation efforts for the wider set of  
19 employees- invariably directed at negotiating cultural rigidities and institutional dynamics.  
20 Ability and willingness levels may thus suggest a certain way of calibrating the transformation  
21 initiative for superior gains.  
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30 This illustrative outline of performance impact is simplistic in not bringing into play other  
31 outcome -effect combinations like leadership issues and political agendas that could affect  
32 realised performance (Siebert, 2019). The paper acknowledges these but does not explicitly  
33 draw observations and evidence for these as the interpretative biases in the immersive context  
34 of the study are likely to be strong. The approach for generating observations underpinning the  
35 paper, and observations are provided later. For now, let us continue to discuss logics behind  
36 how willingness and ability manifest using illustrative scenarios.  
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42 There is a likely variation in willingness and ability levels between stakeholder groups, and  
43 difference between willingness and ability levels for each stakeholder group. For instance, say  
44 the delivery team has its abilities enhanced through experience of the first phase of the initiative  
45 in collaboration with an outsourced provider. As a consequence of enhanced abilities, the team  
46 then seeks to bring development and implementation completely in house at a certain stage,  
47 while the senior management is keen to get continued support from external partnerships given  
48 the good performance. This thus creates a misalignment in ability and willingness levels  
49 between stakeholders. In other words, high ability and high willingness in the delivery team  
50 but low willingness despite high ability to provide sanction in the senior management team.  
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3 Once again this is a call to action for negotiating a transformation performance-based  
4 misalignment between institutional stakeholders.  
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7 For employees also, the willingness and ability interface could be positioned in different ways.  
8 For instance, the ability to absorb and adapt to changes maybe high but willingness may be low  
9 due to uncertainties about say potential reduction in personnel once new technology  
10 enhancements automate processes. This third stakeholder set – that of employees may also be  
11 aligned towards one or the other source based on their experience - in the delivery team  
12 example, this would be a with a choice between external support and a completely inhouse  
13 transformation team. If this is not aligned with senior management belief and action for  
14 choosing either or a collaborative mix of certain type, willingness levels may drop. Political  
15 equations, power exercised by champions of the delivery team/unit and their own legitimacy  
16 of course come into play as mediating influences, as noted before (Schraeder, Tears, and  
17 Jordan 2005; Sibert 2016). Also, if a conflict between delivery team’s thinking and senior  
18 management preferences comes to the fore, both willingness and ability for uptake by  
19 employees may suffer. Clearly at this point, another perspective on ability that of senior  
20 management and leadership - to mobilise organisational commitment and to achieve alignment  
21 with the delivery team’s aspirations and confidence, becomes the focus of attention (Young et  
22 al. 2012).  
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35 A central variable affecting both willingness and ability is quite clearly past performance (Jha  
36 and Bhalla 2018). Past performance is called upon for determining how initiatives gather  
37 momentum or change direction - whether it is immediate past performance or the trajectory of  
38 performance over time, consequences of performance experiences are recognised across the  
39 board, and moderated by different contextual aspects for different stakeholders - like  
40 institutional dynamics, structural inertia and aspirations, to name a few. Longitudinal analysis  
41 of transformation at PSO delivers strategic insights into how decisions get affected by  
42 performance signals. This then dwells into a more nuanced understanding of how stakeholders’  
43 willingness and ability contexts vary and to what effect.  
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51 As an initial stab, the interplay of willingness of ability at the macro organisational level  
52 without involving the different stakeholders can be visualised in figure 1. The long run and  
53 short run demarcations are important to note. In the short run willingness will shape  
54 investments and pursuits for ability enhancements. In the long run if there is with continued  
55 superior performance, the demands from ability enhancements will also become higher. It is  
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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.

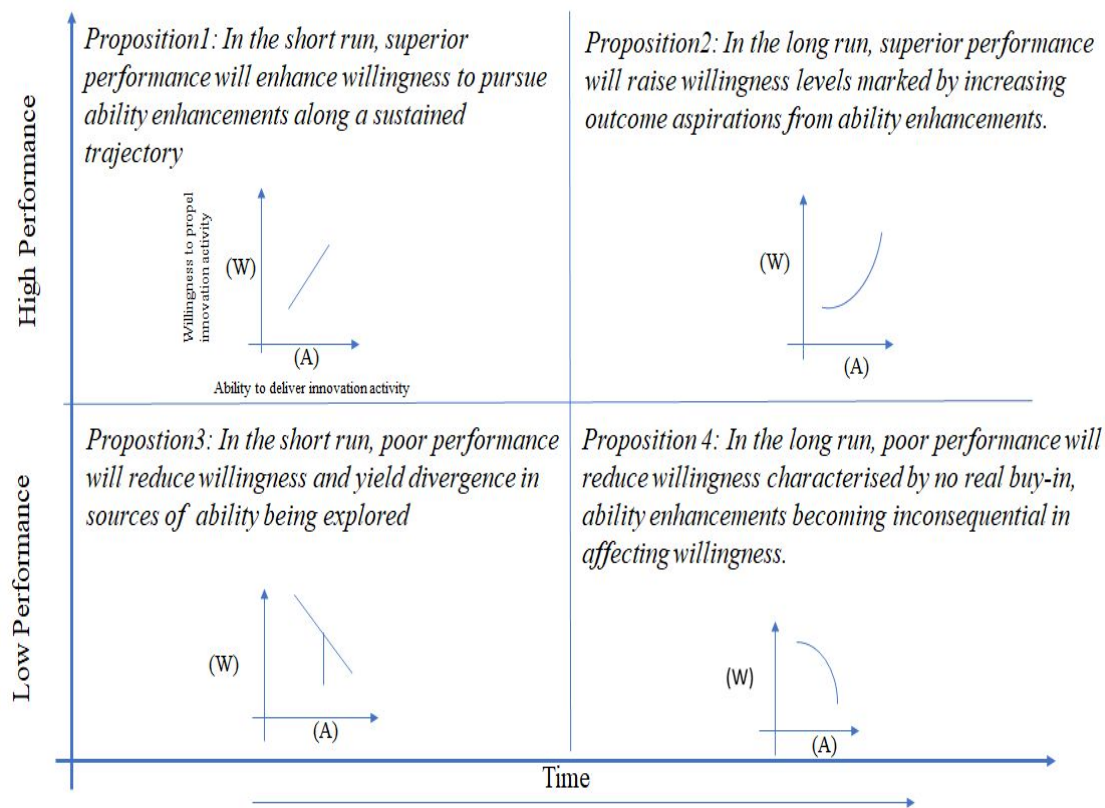


Figure 1: Organisational level perspective: Willingness and Ability overtime - Mediation by performance in Public sector innovation initiatives

### 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

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3 behavioural interactions. Several central barrier nodes were identified, and interactions  
4 modelled. For instance, funding barriers, innovation champion turnover, middle management  
5 inertia, among others.  
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9 The willingness and ability context came forth as an underlying aspect only after discussions  
10 on causality. The interaction between and emphasis across the barrier nodes changed over time  
11 and the reasons were often in realised performance, where the enaction of performance  
12 feedback could be seen to affect changes in willingness and ability levels. We associate with  
13 the notion of a ‘processual framework’ where the importance of working in an immersive  
14 context (one author) for analysing organisational change and then taking the interpretative  
15 synthesis to deep dive outside the context is advised (i.e. as here, other authors involved in  
16 framing the narrative not being part of the immersive context) (Dawson 1997). Furthermore,  
17 the “focus is not on working the data to strengthen the generalisability of the findings but rather,  
18 to provide narrative accounts of the continuously developing and complex dynamic of people  
19 in organisations. Although general trends can be identified and typical responses recounted,  
20 under the processual framework, one is significant” (Dawson 1997: 401).  
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30 The reflections were supported and validated in part by organisational reporting of the progress  
31 of this initiative from 2012 to 2018. Direct quotes or naming of personnel has been avoided for  
32 reasons of confidentiality. The study has already provided feedback to PSO in late 2018.  
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### 36 **Journey through a Public Sector Transformation Initiative**

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39 An internal baseline study was conducted in 2012 to explore trajectories for pursuing the  
40 transformation agenda of superior efficiency and productivity. This was synchronised with the  
41 austerity mandate under change as ‘innovation and digital transformation’ at PSO. The  
42 implementation of in-house recommendations received varying support - not as much because  
43 of lack of willingness but because of change in leadership positions within senior management.  
44 The customers of change i.e. the PSO employees demonstrated considerable inertia given  
45 entrenched methods and processes they were used to. This then required careful reselling of  
46 the transformation agenda after an initial lack of reception. At this point willingness in senior  
47 management became marked with more caution, if not reduced. There was sanction for external  
48 partnerships to recalibrate the initiative but with a rather conservative budget. Overall, lack of  
49 initial uptake, as a marker for willingness in one stakeholder set potentially reducing  
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3 willingness as a function of risk perception in another. Clearly, demonstrating interaction  
4 between willingness levels across stakeholders.  
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7 Initial willingness in the senior management and leadership was triggered by a government  
8 push for public service performance uplifts through transformation productivity, staff  
9 engagement and automation. This was to also meet aspirations of long-term savings in public  
10 - spending. But with low reception of the initiative, senior management willingness confronted  
11 a perception of low ability to see it through – attributed mostly to the delivery team. There was  
12 no evaluation of the team’s activities, only of the uptake in the employee set. The solicitation  
13 of external partners indicated a propensity to work on external legitimacy. This was preferred  
14 over supporting abilities of the internal delivery team by focused review and feedback, and also  
15 instead of investments in senior management led sensitization to push up willingness levels.  
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23 *Proposition 5a: When initial willingness meets below par performance, organisational ability*  
24 *to deliver may stand compromised due to external legitimacy seeking behaviour of the senior*  
25 *management.*  
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33 *Proposition 5b: The need to reassure senior management for preventing a sharp drop in their*  
34 *willingness, may conflict with support required for ramping up willingness and ability of other*  
35 *stakeholder sets.*  
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38 Things changed in the senior management team in late 2013 with strong personalities leaving  
39 the organisation. It was also marked by a poor hand over of the leadership baton for the  
40 initiative and poor emphasis on establishing proper lines of communication. This view of the  
41 handover was also widely shared by employees, willingness dropped across all stakeholders.  
42 Interestingly this was potentially somewhat less of a drop for the delivery team. The reason  
43 being their involvement in ability enhancements through external partnerships, and very  
44 positive experience thereof, despite initial apprehensions. The partnerships drew on both  
45 external systems’ providers and change consultants with strong credentials from being  
46 involved with other transformation initiatives in the public sector. Enhanced ability in the  
47 delivery team through these but low willingness overall was not giving the initiative a chance  
48 to bounce back strongly. Budgets became tighter and internal re-engagement processes  
49 initiated by the delivery team became crucial for the initiative to survive let alone regain  
50 momentum. The re-engagement was essentially driving at willingness in employees and in  
51 senior management to allow enhanced abilities of the delivery team to get some traction.  
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3 *Proposition 6: While leadership slack felt by employees will dampen momentum, perceptions*  
4 *about enhanced ability in delivery could just about keep the initiative afloat.*  
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7 Minor trials in 2014 and 2015 showed real potential through strong efficiency results. However,  
8 the desire for a bigger trial that would fundamentally tackle major transformation needs  
9 identified waned. This was because senior management now questioned the speed. Doubts  
10 were raised about in-house skills and abilities to handle such upscaling so soon. The approach  
11 promulgated was to hold off tackling difficult barriers identified and to stick with low risk  
12 ability support, essentially what was purchase of ability support or ‘purchase innovation’, albeit  
13 with a careful eye on costs. The faith in outsourced input remained firm after this relatively  
14 more ‘performing’ period. Effective support through external parties in the past was  
15 highlighted to validate this strategy.  
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23 *Proposition 7: Superior performance through external support for ability transformation will*  
24 *facilitate momentum. However, it may also infuse caution in willingness demonstrated by*  
25 *senior management to internalise the initiative going forward.*  
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29 The delivery team continued to display benefits of scaling up to influential senior managers  
30 (even if they did not want to see it) and directly approaching the executive committee members  
31 highlighting the saving potential in internalising the transformation delivery i.e. the promise of  
32 allowing the internal delivery team more autonomy and break away from external support after  
33 a couple of years of such support. There was anyway ever lower budget allocation for external  
34 support - ‘not’ upscaling would not yield the desired savings to offset costs. By working an  
35 argument that any upscaling trial would be only utilising existing resources, persuasions led to  
36 some like-minded senior management personnel to eventually prevail despite overall low  
37 willingness for this in the senior management.  
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45 *Proposition 8a: Willingness in one stakeholder set is often crucial for allowing ability and*  
46 *willingness levels in other stakeholder sets to be of consequence.*  
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49 *Proposition 8b: To negotiate low willingness as a barrier, it may be useful to work on more*  
50 *receptive factions within a stakeholder set. This is so as to bundle its willingness with that of*  
51 *other stakeholders. It can often shape critical mass by circumventing overall low willingness*  
52 *in a given stakeholder set.*  
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56 In late 2016 and 2017 with some demonstrated ability to engage employees, smaller teams  
57 from the delivery unit were formed. However, once again through the loss of key staff and  
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3 senior management champions over 2017 and 2018 there was a loss of momentum. The  
4 initiative was positioned precariously but with some upscaling, and some wider organisational  
5 buy in. It is a roller-coaster ride where losing thrust on the climb could have equally disastrous  
6 consequences as when momentum is not controlled going downhill.  
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## 10 **Discussion**

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

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55 We would like to re-acknowledge that the willingness and ability framing could be, as has  
56 been, appeal to a variety of contexts, including transformation narratives not limited to public  
57 sector organisations. The study findings may thus find interest beyond public sector  
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3 organisations but at the same time the conjectures drawn in this paper may align relatively more  
4 closely to the context of transformation in public sector organisations- given the narrative here,  
5 and characteristics of the organisation that influence it. The classical understanding of the  
6 contrast between public sector and the private sector is that the former can ‘typically’ be less  
7 risk averse as public accountability in the larger political and economic landscape stands much  
8 diffused. Private sector organisations on the other hand, have greater performance delivery  
9 pressures. By the same token, propensity to take risk may imply greater momentum in public  
10 sector organisations for innovative transformation. However, here comes the context - the idea  
11 of innovation being led by stronger and larger undercurrents like the ‘austerity drive’ as for  
12 PSO in the paper. This makes innovation too goal directed and confined in terms of resources.  
13 Furthermore, the need for legitimising the spending of public money, and not being below par  
14 to sector performance under a given mandate, is stronger than revelling in novelty and in  
15 outperforming other organisations in the sector. Creation of public value thus being marked  
16 with more conservatism than creation of value. Overall thus, the verdict aligns with  
17 performance narratives of tedious poor public sector innovation.  
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20 For this study, it demonstrates why the conjectures may hold more strongly for public sector  
21 transformations. Institutional dynamics, and negotiating rigidities are more at liberty to play  
22 out the idea of value in satisfying stakeholder perceptions and preferences, than value creation  
23 from innovation, which is inherently scoped from a very long-term outcome perspective.  
24 Willingness and ability deviances and conflicts along the transformation journey thus become  
25 stronger rogue variables to manage in public sector settings. There are other aspects to do with  
26 the nature of leadership demonstrated by senior management and senior management stability  
27 that have been of strong consequence in the narrative. These could be looked at with a niche  
28 focus as strong mediating influences in future research that has stronger, cross organisational  
29 data to work with. Overall however, alignment in willingness and ability, and consequences  
30 thereof, remains an undercurrent that speaks strongly to the understanding of public sector  
31 transformation journey. We believe that our attempt to capture this in the paper will fuel  
32 research interest and inform practice strategies for managing transformation journeys in public  
33 sector organisations.  
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