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In their article “Regulating Public Services: How Public Managers Respond to External Performance Assessment,” Heike Döring, James Downe, and Steve Martin mine fairly old data but unearth fresh insights. They usefully explore the work of the local authority boundary spanners who draw on externally situated action logics in reconstructing internal organizational realities in pursuit of new organizational goals and purposes.

This is important territory, perhaps more so than the authors themselves credit. Underneath the analysis lurks the critical issue of how central actors seeking to stimulate change in subordinate entities might more adroitly craft their interventions to make them more readily acceptable. How should they optimize the prospects of their preferred new directions being integrated or mainstreamed—or at least
“hybridized”—within the working logics, practices, and cultures of those they seek to influence? The initial Best Value regime applied to local government in England clearly did not achieve the desired result, but CPA got much closer, as Döring, Downe, and Martin demonstrate.

The process of developing new “improvement” logics is important not just in the United Kingdom but also in a much wider range of jurisdictions, including federal jurisdictions in which federal governments look to states and provinces to deliver key programs but lack a full array of legal and constitutional levers. They increasingly turn to benchmarking as an instrument. But external benchmarking and associated financial levers are no match for entrenched internal logics capable of resisting or ignoring those outcomes the center hopes to buy. Thus, there is a potential policy benefit associated with a focus on public managers’ social construction of their work in responding to external regulation.

Nor is this benefit confined to the corporate managers who made good use of the CPA externalities. The authors strike a chord when they say that external performance assessment “with its collection of managerially inspired practices, norms, and signs, becomes a resource in the configuration of a new, hybrid institutional logic of improvement.” Frontline social work professionals, for example, similarly use externalities such as legal rules as a social action resource in going about doing their social work task better or differently, at least as they see it.

So how does the center improve the chances of its own logic taking root, especially given that gaming and ritual compliance continue to be real risks? Döring, Downe, and Martin focus (perhaps too much?) on the “power” issue. They see public managers harnessing CPA “to enhance their own power vis-à-vis colleagues.” They also suggest more research on the ways that local actors adopt and adapt to (for example) service-based inspections to enhance their power and influence, and on power and conflict as creative resources in generating and establishing new realities. But they get closer to the nub of the issue when they emphasize that CPAs were coproduced between key actors in local and central government and “could not have been implemented without the support of public managers who benefited from it professionally” (emphasis added). Professions and power are, of course, easy bedfellows, whether at the macro or micro level, but a “professional” emphasis does open the door to wider considerations than just power and conflict. It is not—or at least ought not to be—just a matter of who has most power but what works best and for whom.

The normative question underpinning the CPA regime—in my view, anyway—was that U.K. local government at that time badly needed a stimulus to change. The issue was less about a failure of trust in itself between central and local than failures of performance and resistance to change that made trust difficult to achieve. The fact that the central government was at least as bad in service performance terms may have made the determination to change local government somewhat ironic but hardly dents the legitimacy of the politically led improvement drive that Margaret Thatcher started and Tony Blair intensified. The more difficult issue in practice is not the right of the center to seek better services for citizens and communities, or even the motives for doing so, as much as it is its competence and capability to secure buy-in from those who are needed to coproduce the changes it seeks.

The answer lies, at least in part, in central governments taking a “program” approach to how their new directions and policies can best be given effect by other entities. Achieving a genuine change of direction in other entities requires a holistic approach that drives proportionately, incentives appropriately, resources intelligently, and persuades confidently and with an understanding of the situations and logics of key actors in the field. Ideally, the center should enlist others as active partners, but life is not always like that, and the less that a full and shared partnership is possible, the more canny the center needs to be.

This is not a lesson that the 2010–15 coalition government seemed to want to apply, at least in certain fields. Thus, it abolished a multi-stakeholder Children’s Improvement Board with potential to be a conduit for generating a wider improvement logic in local government children’s services, and instead it strengthened its capacity to intervene in the case of service failures. For my own part, I have the privilege of advising the Kosovan government on the reconstruction of its performance management system for local government, and if I can get some key passages of Döring, Downe, and Martin translated into Albanian to distribute to some of those who do not yet fully get the message of coproduction, then I shall.