Cops, Teachers, and the Art of the Impossible: Explaining the Lack of Diffusion of Innovations That Make Impossible Jobs Possible

In their 1990 book Impossible Jobs in Public Management, Erwin C. Hargrove and John C. Glidewell argue that public agencies with limited legitimacy, high conflict, low professional authority, and weak agency myths have essentially impossible jobs. Yet some such positions have proven operationally possible. For example, over a 17-year period, the New York City Police Department achieved dramatic reductions in crime. A second impossible job discussed by James Q. Wilson, the urban school superintendent, has also proven possible, with Washington, D.C., having considerable success educating disadvantaged children. However, these successes in urban crime control and public schooling have not been widely copied. Building on the work of Manuel P. Teodoro, the authors use these cases to discuss how the inflexibility of personnel systems and political costs of disruptive reforms combine with the professional norms and progressive ambition of agency leaders to limit the diffusion of innovations in law enforcement and schooling. The article concludes with hypotheses for future testing.

Are some public management jobs impossible to perform well? If so, what are they and what factors render them impossible? And when public agencies seemingly succeed at impossible jobs, why don’t like agencies make more than superficial efforts to copy them? The “impossible jobs” debate is a lively issue in the public management field, and police commissioner and urban school superintendent are popular candidates for the impossible job moniker (Hargrove and Glidewell 1990; Hess 1999; Wilson 1989). In this article, we consider whether big-city police commissioners and public school superintendents actually have jobs that are impossible to perform successfully. Based on two famous and illustrative examples—New York City police commissioner William Bratton and District of Columbia public schools chancellor Michelle Rhee—we arrive at some theoretical propositions that many seemingly impossible jobs in public management are technically able to be performed well, but the operational innovations that make impossible jobs possible tend to generate political fallout that gets the innovator fired. Until managerial leaders pursuing seemingly impossible jobs better understand how to solve their operational problems without creating severe political problems, we surmise that many brilliant managerial innovations will fail to diffuse widely across the country.

This article proceeds as follows: The first section examines the theoretical literature regarding impossible jobs and the diffusion of innovation in public management. The next section describes the case of Commissioner William Bratton and his successful CompStat program and related innovations. The case of D.C. schools chancellor Michelle Rhee is presented in the next section. The following section formulates research hypotheses going forward based on the theory and cases presented, and the last section concludes.

Review of the Theoretical Literature on Impossible Jobs and the Diffusion of Innovation

In Impossible Jobs in Public Management, Hargrove and Glidewell (1990) suggest that some public posts are simply too difficult to manage successfully. If an agency’s clients are perceived as illegitimate, it will be difficult to garner the resources needed to serve those clients and to motivate employees to serve them well (see also Lipsky 1980). If an agency has high-conflict constituencies, with disagreement as to its means and ends, it will face challenges in initiating and implementing policies. If an agency profession has limited respect from the public, it may well be micromanaged (also Warwick 1975). Similarly, if an organization has a weak “agency myth,” leaders...
will have trouble recruiting employees and gaining resources (see also Goodsell 2011).

For the most part, Hargrove and Glidewell present a political theory of public administration in which political conflict and the low status of an organization, its professionals, and its clients prevent it from gaining the respect and resources necessary to succeed. Wolf (1993) similarly found that a “Political Theory of the Firm” best explained variation in the effectiveness of federal government agencies, as agencies with competitive mission environments, strong presidential support, political autonomy, a strong sense of mission, and operational adaptability were associated with higher levels of effectiveness. Those agencies without such favorable political environments tended to struggle. In contrast, Wilson’s (1989) Bureaucracy offers a somewhat more optimistic managerial theory of organizational success. Wilson categorizes organizations based on the measurability of their outputs and procedures. “Production” organizations such as the Social Security Administration have measurable goals and optimal procedures—what Wilson calls “known technologies”—and thus can be controlled and ultimately improved. In contrast, “coping organizations” have immeasurable goals and processes with no known connection to outputs (“unknown technologies”) and therefore are unlikely to succeed. Coping organizations, according to Wilson, include police departments and public school systems. As DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue, such organizations may pursue innovation less for efficiency than to gain legitimacy by copying organizations with higher status.

We suggest that although these various classification systems and typologies are useful, they have a tendency to be static and overgeneralized. They leave out the incentives faced by organization leaders and employees. They also leave little room for innovations in an organization’s professions and technologies or in the political environment supporting an organization. After all, what if an agency with controversial goals gains support through social learning and political entrepreneurship? What if clients were redefined, proactively by the agency, in such a way as to increase their legitimacy? What if adroit administrators simply triangulated among the supposedly competing goals of representation, neutral competence, and executive leadership without overemphasizing any one of them? What if managerial entrepreneurs brought personnel and technologies together in such a way as to “create public value” (Moore 1995)? And what if success for a government organization were as close as a failure that subsequently ushers in new leadership and a new organizational ideology? We draw on the example of military counterinsurgency to make our point here. The strategy and tactics of counterinsurgency date back (at least) to the Romans. Yet the United States, largely for bureaucratic reasons, failed to embrace and implement counterinsurgency in Vietnam until the political will to fight the war had waned—five years into large-scale conflict (Krepinevich 1986; Maranto and Tuchman 1992). In contrast, in part because of the relatively recent Vietnam failure, the U.S. military embraced counterinsurgency tactics after only three years in Iraq, and those tactics apparently led to tactical military success (Brooks 2009; U.S. Department of the Army 2007).

In part, the impossible jobs literature reflects the administrative pessimism of the 1970s and 1980s. In contrast, since the era of reinventing government, a series of works have examined the ability of entrepreneurial leaders to change organizational culture in ways that lead to profound improvement in public service, typically by selling their policies to existing staff and using an improved “agency myth” to recruit new staff and gain support from stakeholders. Although the reinventing government movement undersold the importance of the political elements of any strategy of bureaucratic effectiveness, it at least challenged the public administration field to explain why problems cannot be solved by public agencies in some policy domains and geographic areas when they are seemingly being solved in others. Numerous case studies of such institutions as the military, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Social Security Administration, National Endowment for the Arts, Federal Emergency Management Agency, Veterans Administration, and local organizations such as port authorities and individual public schools fall within this category of successful organizational turnarounds (Abramson and Bacon 2001; Barzelay and Armajani 1992; Doig and Hargrove 1987; Kelman 2005; Khademian 2001; Maranto 2005; Osborne and Gaebler 1992; Osborne and Plastrik 1997; Sullivan and Harper 1997). The political and operational environments of agencies may be structural forces that limit the actions and effectiveness of agencies (Wilson 1989; Wolf 1997); nevertheless, such factors are not necessarily permanent and are the proper targets of any truly transformational organizational leader (Bass 1998; Bass and Avolio 1994).

Informed by the intersection of the literature on impossible jobs and the literature on managerial entrepreneurs, we argue that new political and bureaucratic entrepreneurs find ways to make impossible jobs possible, police commissioner and city school superintendent. We will detail how policing succeeded in New York City and how one of the country’s most forlorn big-city schools district had considerable success. We will then explain why these victories remained local. In other words, why have police and school bureaucracies in other cities failed to copy the seemingly successful policy innovations of the New York City Police Department and D.C. Public Schools?

The real conundrum of impossible jobs, we contend, is not their inherent impossibility, but rather their spread-ability: when new political and bureaucratic entrepreneurs find ways to make impossible jobs possible, why don’t others do likewise? We suggest that personnel practices and professional ideologies play key roles, as Teodoro (2009, 2011) finds. Teodoro argues that the policy innovation literature has focused too much on the need for policy changes (demand) and not enough on “the incentives for individuals to become policy entrepreneurs (supply)” (2009, 175). Bureaucratic labor markets determine the supply of policy entrepreneurs:

Local governments’ hiring and promotional practices determine the paths by which bureaucrats may advance. Agencies and professions that feature diagonal advancement (via
movement from one organization to another) select executives based on their reputations for policy innovation. Agencies that promote leaders vertically from within do not rely so heavily on professional reputation, but rather select bureaucrats based on familiarity and adherence to standard organizational norms... hiring practices affect policy outcomes (176).

Agencies that hire from within—following an “insider” leadership strategy—frequently have only one serious candidate for leadership positions, making policy innovation particularly unlikely. Moreover, vertical hiring fosters the “Peter principle” (Peter and Hull 1969), with workers rising to the level of their incompetence. Notably, in both diagonal and vertical agencies, ambitious officials are likely to copy the behavior of those earning promotions. Using a data set of police chiefs and water utility directors, Teodoro (2009, 2011) finds that agencies that hire leaders from the outside are more likely to innovate, and to innovate in ways that accord with prescriptions of the national policy community rather than the local organization or local elites. Teodoro (2011, 53–58) sees such administrative innovators less as agents working for elected principals than as professionals loyal to the national or regional professional community, which might offer suitable exit options if relations in the local community turn sour.

Similarly, Almy (1975) finds that city managers with more “cosmopolitan” rather than “local” orientations are better educated, more likely to change jobs to seek upward mobility, and more apt to take stands that might offend local elites. At the same time, we suggest that both local and cosmopolitan administrative leaders might well use terminated agency heads as negative role models and avoid actions that have proven hazardous to careers. Accordingly, the most innovative officials may in fact turn out to be what Downs (1967) terms zealots, who have the dedication to create new policies. In contrast, self-interested climbers are more likely to adopt policies already deemed desirable by the national professional community or by local informal networks within the organization, even if they are less than optimal in practice. This dynamic has important implications for how police chiefs and school superintendents may embrace or eschew specific innovations, regardless of the efficacy of said policies.

Finally, we consider the crucial matter of agency myths (Dilulio 1994; Goodsell 2011). Just as agency myths matter, so, too, do professional myths. Some professional myths have more legitimacy than others. For example, it is notable that business communities often involve themselves in education reform (Henig et al. 1999; Hess 1999) but never show the same level of involvement in criminal justice reform, even though high crime might prove as damaging to business as poor schools. Seemingly, not all street-level bureaucrats are created equal: outsiders show more deference to cops than to teachers, perhaps because they have more exposure to the latter.

All of these elements of bureaucratic theory—the operational and political aspects of leadership, the importance of managerial entrepreneurs, insider/outsider hiring policies, and agency myths—interact in instructive ways in the stories of how William Bratton and Michelle Rhee made the seemingly impossible possible, at least for a limited time and in a certain place.

**Urban Policing: Doing the Impossible**

After homicide rates tripled in the 1960s, albeit from historically low levels, urban policing was considered an impossible job. Liberals typically argued that crime would decrease only when its root causes—poverty and discrimination—were eliminated (e.g., Orfield and Ashkinaze 1991). Similarly, many conservatives focused on root causes, although for them, the culprits were welfare dependency and family breakdown (e.g., Murray 1984). Neither broad ideological current had much faith in policing. Criminal justice academics likewise saw crime as linked to root causes rather than weak policing (Kelling and Sousa 2001). Analysts who did study policing typically took the approach that crime rates influence police culture, not that policing tactics could seriously cut crime (Moskos 2008; Wilson 1978).

In 1993, New York City had 1,946 homicides. Although this was down 13 percent from its all-time high of 2,245 in 1990, the rate was very high compared to other cities and even to recent New York history. Moreover, demographic trends led analysts to predict rising homicide rates. In response to the problem and the subsequent image that New York City was too dangerous a place to live in or visit, Mayor David Dinkins began to increase the number of police officers and also gave more authority to his innovative police commissioner, Raymond Kelly (Timoney 2010). When Rudy Giuliani defeated Dinkins, largely on the crime issue, he immediately appointed William Bratton as police commissioner. Bratton, a Bostonian, had previously served as chief of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority Police, the Metropolitan District Commission Police, the New York City Transit Police, and, briefly, the Boston Police Department, all in a 10-year span. In each job, he had performed as a change agent, upsetting routines and traditional networks and also attracting new resources and talent to improve performance and cut crime. Bratton invariably started out by spending considerable time on the front lines with street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980), building his own credibility and focusing on ways to fundamentally change their behavior. Bratton also worked at public relations and built relationships with unconventional allies, such as Boston’s gay and lesbian community (Bratton and Knobler 1998). In sharp contrast to police traditions, he was a zealot out to reform organizations rather than a more traditional loyal, conservant functionary seeking to maintain his post and relationships (Downs 1967).

Seemingly, not all street-level bureaucrats are created equal: outsiders show more deference to cops than to teachers, perhaps because they have more exposure to the latter. Bratton adopted policies that might make traditional police leaders uncomfortable. As a cosmopolitan rather than a local, his advancement was tied to regional or national job markets rather than to insider status or local political connections. It makes sense to appoint an outsider when an organization is underperforming (Hamidullah, Wilkins, and Meier 2009; Heifetz 1994; Maranto 2005). Moreover, organizational leadership has the most leverage over outcomes when performance levels are low (Doig and Hargrove 1987, 4). After all, we don’t give a mechanic free rein to tear apart an engine when our car is operating smoothly or allow a surgeon to cut...
open a healthy patient. Administrative leadership replaces administrative functionality when such functionality appears to be lacking.

With Giuliani's focus on law and order, Bratton received more resources and support, and he used this over a frenetic three-year period to reshape the New York City Police Department (NYPD). Bratton brought in a team of reformers who looked for ways to change street-level behavior. Influenced by Wilson and Kelling (1982), Bratton focused on minor crimes such as subway turnstile jumpers so as to send a message that the police controlled the streets and would not tolerate crime. New technologies enabled officers to immediately check the criminal history of arrested suspects. This allowed officers to make many “good collars” of serious criminals, building support among the police and taking more “bad guys” off the streets. Bratton also used new equipment and more attractive uniforms to gain support from officers.

Commissioner Bratton gained public acclaim for his use of CompStat, a new data tool delivering (almost) real-time reports of crimes committed and arrests, thus enabling central leaders to manage policing resources as never before. Bratton’s team held weekly CompStat meetings with precinct commanders, pushing them to find innovative ways to cut crime—or else. Reflecting “macho” police culture (Moskos 2008; Wilson 1978), top NYPD officials running CompStat meetings would sharply question precinct commanders, in front of their peers (Bratton and Knobler 1998; Silverman 1999; Timoney 2010). Such approaches might not work for teachers or even principals, who would likely respond with sabotage at best and strikes at worst (Loveless 2000; Polka and Litchka Silverman 1999; Zavodsky 2009).

Less often remarked on are four additional factors that contributed to Bratton’s success. First, the pre-Bratton NYPD had substantial talent, in part because it recruited nationally rather than just locally and had significant barriers to entry such as requiring prior military service or two years of college. Indeed, as Bratton’s chief of the department, Timoney (2010) writes, many Bratton-era changes had in fact begun under his predecessor, Raymond Kelly, who in 2002 was reappointed NYPD commissioner by Mayor Michael Bloomberg and, at this writing, has served for a remarkable 10 years. Second, CompStat yielded relatively honest numbers because the street-level cops who reported the numbers had no incentive to lie to make their precinct commanders look better; indeed, many probably wanted to see more vacancies at the top to increase their possibilities for promotion. While some have charged that NYPD commanders have pushed patrol officers to undercount crime, it is notable that the crimes that are most difficult to undercount, murders and car thefts (the latter because of insurance claims), have declined the most (Bratton 2010), suggesting that CompStat is generally accurate.

Third, in CompStat meetings and at other opportunities, Bratton and his deputies would not only criticize poor performance; they would also point to precincts whose leaders used innovative techniques to drive down crime. They pushed others to follow suit, turning the NYPD into a learning organization. But why should police learn? Of course, one would like to think that police officers want to reduce crime, but unfortunately, this is not always a sufficient motive to convince experienced officials to change practices that have worked for them, if not for the public. As

Bratton’s changes brought immediate results. Bratton served as NYPD commissioner from 1994 until 1996. During his tenure, homicide rates in the city decreased far more rapidly than before and more steeply than the average for the nation as a whole, building support among both police officers and the general public for the reforms to continue (see figure 1). (To repeat, we use homicide statistics because they are difficult for police and prosecutors to manipulate.) Further, despite two notorious cases of brutality, statistics show that the number of civilians killed by the NYPD declined even more rapidly than the homicide rate under Bratton’s watch, suggesting that police did not have to be brutal to be effective. Bratton’s reforms continued after his (forced) resignation, but the reasons for his short tenure explain why other cities have not adopted similar reforms, at least not to the depth practiced by the NYPD.
As Bratton details in discussions of Boston and New York police politics (Bratton and Knobler 1998), police commissioners are, for the most part, fired for scandals and for political reasons, not for high crime rates, points echoed by Timoney (2010). Four NYPD commissioners (including long-serving Raymond Kelly) served in the 1994–2008 era of declining and low crime rates, compared with five serving in the 1980–94 period of high and stable crime rates. Similarly, in the low-crime period from 1950 to 1965, the NYPD had five commissioners, compared to six in the high-crime 1965–83 period. We compiled data regarding trends in homicide rates and police commissioner tenure for nine of the 10 largest cities in the United States from 1990 to 2009. No matter how the variables were lagged, we found no correlation between the two. If murders were going down, a commissioner was as likely to be fired as retained, and vice versa.

The primary research organization for police commissioners is the Police Executive Research Forum. A forum official states that there is no large-N research on why police commissioners are fired (telephone interview, July 22, 2010), although scholarly case studies (Rainguet and Dodge 2001) suggest that Bratton is correct. Any police commissioner operating as a change agent will accumulate internal enemies who are likely to leak embarrassing information to the media. Further, as in Bratton’s case, if a police commissioner grows too popular, he or she can become a political threat to the mayor. Shortly after Bratton polled as more popular than Mayor Giuliani and rumors suggested a Bratton mayoral race, Giuliani fired him, ostensibly for concerns about the propriety of his book deal (Bratton and Knobler 1998; Timoney 2010). After Bratton and his closest confidents were dismissed, the NYPD’s new leadership kept his policies in place. Homicides continued to fall substantially until 2000, and since then have remained low and stable.

Despite his outstanding record, it took Bratton six years to land another commissioner post. Bratton’s long unemployment reflected his lack of urgency attributable to a large consulting income (Timoney 2010), but also to his political taint. Finally, Bratton was chosen to lead the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). Crime steadily declined during Bratton’s first six years in Los Angeles (Rubin and Winton 2009), until he announced his intention to retire in 2009. Interestingly, a source close to Bratton suggests that he was disappointed with his record in the LAPD. Los Angeles has 413 residents per officer compared to 233 residents per officer in New York. Bratton had expected to expand the LAPD by roughly 30 percent, promising that with more officers, he could make Los Angeles the safest city in North America. Political support for additional resources was not forthcoming, however, and within two months of his appointment, Bratton scaled back plans for expansion (Garza 2002; Nash 2002).

In short, as Downs (1967) and Teodo (2009) warn, innovators cannot be separated from their job markets. The clear lesson to Brattonists is that too much operational success can lead to career failure. In addition, as Bratton and Knobler (1998) and Kelling and Sousa (2001) point out, traditional criminal justice academic programs do not necessarily support the view that police can reduce crime and, perhaps for this reason, have avoided studying the NYPD’s success. With the exceptions of Silverman and Kelling, academics who have studied the NYPD’s success (Robert Behn and Robert Moffit) are political scientists rather than criminal justice professors; thus, there is no institutionalized academic body to study and perhaps promote reforms. Some suggest that academics may receive subtle messages that studying the NYPD will not help them earn grants and promotions (Kelling and Sousa 2001; Maranto, Redding, and Hess 2009). Bratton-style reforms are thus not part of the standard playbook for criminal justice professionals.

The Trouble with Urban Schools

As Wilson (1989) makes clear, urban schooling is another area in which traditional public organizations have had little success. Although inner-city public schools now spend about the same amount per student as nearby suburbs, and sometimes more, they have a difficult time educating the children of underclass parents. Big-city schools struggle with crime, racial and political divisions, teachers unions, and entrenched bureaucracies that more often hinder than help learning (Alonso et al. 2009). Further, a more challenging clientele often makes it difficult for urban school systems to attract and retain talented teachers, who can typically earn the same pay for easier work in suburban schools (Henig et al. 1999; Hess 1999; Portz, Stein, and Jones 1999). This stands in contrast to policing, in which large urban districts often offer more prestige and more money. Yet, as in the case of crime prevention, liberals and conservatives often blame “root causes,” implicitly and in some cases explicitly arguing that schools cannot make much of a difference in the lives of low-income children. On the left, many believe that disadvantaged students can learn more only when poverty and discrimination are eliminated (Lipman 2011; Orfield and Ashkinaze 1991). Similarly, many conservatives blame welfare dependency and family breakdown for low student achievement (Murray 1984; Weissberg 2010). Neither broad ideological current has much faith in schooling.

Of the 60 urban school districts tracked by the Council of the Great City Schools for its Beating the Odds report (2010), from 2006 to 2009, only 15 produced rates of student achievement gain that exceeded the average gain rate for their state in both reading and math and for both fourth and eighth graders. Using the standard of student rates of achievement gain over time levels the playing field for urban school districts, which tend to enroll students with much lower levels of initial academic preparation than public school districts in suburban or even rural areas. Some urban school districts clearly have done better than others, at least for a time, and in each case, the key actor was a reform superintendent (Henig et al. 1999; Portz, Stein, and Jones 1999). In no city were the educational gains more dramatic and the reforms more aggressive than in Washington, D.C., under Chancellor Michelle Rhee.

In 2007, many observers viewed the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) as one of the worst urban public school systems in the country. Though its students were predominantly low-income and minority, the district still scored well below the level that would be predicted by its demographic profile. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only 17 percent of the system’s fourth graders were proficient or better at mathematics in 2007, and just 18 percent in reading. The situation was worse for students who continued in the DCPS through junior high school: 9 percent were proficient or better in math in 2007 and just 13 percent achieved that level in reading (NAEP 2010). The five-year
high school graduation rate for ninth graders in the DCPS was an abysmal 43 percent, and less than 10 percent of DCPS graduates had obtained a college degree five years later (Risen 2008, 3). In 2007, in spite of such dispiriting student outcomes, 95 percent of teachers in the DCPS received job performance ratings of satisfactory or better (Whitmire 2011, 124).

Record keeping at the DCPS was so poor that the Council of the Great City Schools could not even include the district in its comparative reports prior to 2006, and a Freedom of Information Act request in 2004 revealed that more than 25,000 DCPS work orders remained outstanding (Kronholz 2010). District enrollment had declined by 54 percent, from more than 140,000 in 1970 to just 64,000 in 2006, as families fled the system by moving to area suburbs or enrolling their children in one of more than three dozen public charter schools that opened in D.C. from 1997 through 2006 (Buckley and Schneider 2007). The public school system in the nation’s capital was thought to be such a lose cause that Congress and President George W. Bush established the first federal school voucher program in D.C. in 2004 to provide low-income families with an escape hatch to move their children to private schools (Wolf et al. 2010). William Wilhoyte, a top DCPS official brought in by Superintendent Paul Vance shortly before Rhee took over, characterized the school system in blunt terms: “There was no quality. There was no curriculum. There was no true evaluation. There was no one being held accountable. And there was no good instruction” (quoted in Whitmire 2011, 67).

In 2007, recently elected Mayor Adrian Fenty addressed the crisis much as Mayor Giuliani had addressed the 1990s crime spree in New York City. Fenty took control of the school system out of the hands of the public school board through a mayoral control initiative, resisted political pressures to hire an experienced schools superintendent (i.e., “insider”), and instead placed complete authority in the hands of a new chancellor of the DCPS named Michelle Rhee.

In 2007, Rhee became the tenth superintendent (now chancellor) of the DCPS in just 19 years (Whitmire 2011, vi). She had graduated from Cornell University with a major in government and had been an early recruit into the Teach for America program (Whitmire 2011, 21–22). After three challenging but ultimately successful years teaching in inner-city Baltimore and a year obtaining a master’s degree from Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, Rhee was hired to spearhead the New Teacher Project, a Teach for America program for mid-career professionals (Risen 2008, 5). At the time she was appointed chancellor of the DCPS, Rhee was 38 years old and had never worked in a management position within the education establishment. Moreover, she was a Korean American running the public education system in what residents sometimes call “Chocolate City, USA” (Urban Dictionary 2012). Mayor Fenty could hardly have found more of a system outsider to be the D.C. schools chancellor than Michelle Rhee.

As a government major, Rhee knew that she was wading into a politically challenging environment. As a former educator, she also knew that urban education reform required “disruptive strategies” that would unsettle the status quo and those comfortable with it (Whitmire 2011, 59). Rhee viewed herself, first and foremost, as a “change agent” (Risen 2008, 6). She had twice rebuffed overtures from Fenty’s advisors to take the regular D.C. superintendent’s position. Finally, Fenty met with her personally and shared his plan to take control of the school system so that the schools leader only had to answer to him, change the job title to chancellor, and provide Rhee with the complete authority to hire and fire principals (Risen 2008, 6). This command authority over the careers of top managers in the organization was comparable to Commissioner Bratton’s power to promote or demote district commanders in the NYPD. The opportunity to dramatically overhaul a dysfunctional urban school system, with the popular city mayor providing complete political cover, was simply too good an offer for Rhee to pass up.

Rhee, by her own admission, has a reputation as a blunt-speaking, impatient, ruthless, insensitive reformer (Kronholz 2010). In “researchers meet reformers” sessions that we attended at the start of her tenure, she began her presentation by announcing that the “D.C. public schools suck.” Her vision to improve on the failing school system that she controlled was ambitious. The recipe involved repairing the disparate and dysfunctional DCPS information systems, focusing more attention on both accountability and formative assessments (a CompStat for education), evaluating and often firing school principals based on student achievement trends, renegotiating teachers’ collective bargaining agreement so that some teachers could opt to surrender guaranteed tenure in exchange for the opportunity to earn large merit pay bonuses, eschewing the products of the traditional education schools in favor of alternatively certified teachers, closing underenrolled and underperforming schools, and publicly supporting parental school choice (Risen 2008, 7–8; Whitmire 2011, 94–95).

Destroying the organizational myth that low-income urban students cannot learn was both a goal and a strategy for Rhee. Early in her tenure as chancellor, she visited Slow Elementary School, where she was shocked to see a sign prominently displayed at child’s height saying, “There is nothing a teacher can do to overcome what a parent and student will not do” (Whitmire 2011, v). As Whitmire puts it, the clear, comforting message for teachers and principals was, “We’re doing the best we can with the flawed children sent our way…” Blaming children and families was pervasive within [DCPS]” (2011, 68). Although researchers since James Coleman have established that family income, race, and parental education substantially influence student outcomes, Rhee needed to fight this widespread perception among D.C. teachers and administrators that background was destiny. Just as Bratton had to make his operators believe that effective policing could reduce crime, Rhee had to establish an organizational ethos that teachers and schools could affect learning. “No Excuses” schools throughout the country, including the KIPP network of public charter schools, had proven that quality schools could produce excellent results even for highly disadvantaged students (Carter 2000; Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003; Tuttle et al. 2010). Rhee’s mission was to establish the DCPS as a “No Excuses” urban school district. As journalist Clay Risen writes, the Michelle Rhee experiment would determine “whether public-school reform is even possible” (2008, 9).

Much as Commissioner Bratton communicated that reducing crime was an imperative by holding commanders accountable for the crime rates in their districts, Chancellor Rhee spread her gospel that poor students can learn by holding principals accountable for Cops, Teachers, and the Art of the Impossible: Explaining the Lack of Diffusion of Innovations That Make Impossible Jobs Possible 235
the level of achievement gains in their schools. By the time that her four-year tenure ended, in 2010, Rhee had fired and replaced half of the administrators in the district’s central office as well as half of the school principals and more than 700 instructional staff (Risen 2008, 2; Whitmire 2011, 82–83, 155). As one of her top assistants, William Wilhoyte, put it, “we were just holding people accountable and responsible for what they ought to be doing” (quoted in Whitmire 2011, 139). Ambitious young education reformers from around the country, Downsian zealots and climbers, flocked to the DCPS to replace the conservers whom Rhee had shown the door (Risen 2008, 2; Whitmire 2011, 132). In the fall of 2007, Rhee announced the closing of 23 underenrolled and underperforming schools as a fait accompli, without first notifying the city council members representing the affected areas, the school staffs, or parents (Whitmire 2011, 97–99).

Like NYPD commissioner Bratton, Chancellor Rhee attracted considerable media attention (Kronholz 2010). She was profiled on 60 Minutes, Charlie Rose, and Newsweek and merited a cover story in Time. Rhee was among the stars of the widely noted school reform documentary Waiting for Superman (2010), directed by noted producer and director Davis Guggenheim, whose prior credits included An Inconvenient Truth. While Bratton challenged his managers in front of their peers, in a colossal act of poor judgment, Rhee fired a school principal on camera (Whitmire 2011, 222). Rhee claimed that her media appearances were helpful in calling attention to the reforms that had to be made in D.C. and served as a “call to arms” for the young reformers she needed to implement her organizational revolution. In her view, the end of boosting student achievement justified the controversial and unsettling means that she used to obtain it.

Rhee’s achievements in four years as chancellor were impressive. She rendered a horrifically dysfunctional central office fully functional regarding important system logistics. She closed grossly inefficient schools. She reclaimed D.C.’s special education program from judicial receivership. She devised a sophisticated and effective teacher performance rating system, called IMPACT, based partly on student achievement gains. She fired demonstrably incompetent teachers and principals, something that few school superintendents ever do (Whitmire 2011, 202–3). Most importantly, rates of “proficiency or above” for DCPS students on the NAEP increased for fourth graders, to 20 percent in math and 22 percent in reading, and also for eighth graders, to 13 percent in math and 15 percent in reading, during Rhee’s tenure (NAEP 2010). Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, said that the achievement gains “were pretty unusual. … as good or better than any other city over the same period” (quoted in Whitmire 2011, 203). Remarkably, in 2010, for the first time in more than 40 years, student enrollment in the DCPS actually increased. Not one to get ahead of herself, Rhee summarized her achievements through 2010 by stating, “we have begun—begun—begun—to establish a culture of accountability” (quoted in Kronholz 2010, 29). More time, Rhee suggested, would be needed to make sure that the DCPS turnaround miracle was real and sustainable.

But more time was not a luxury afforded Chancellor Rhee. By focusing relentlessly and ruthlessly on the operational challenges of managing the D.C. public schools, Rhee paid a political price. Her blunt language about the conditions in the DCPS may have endeared her to reformers and the media, but it alienated some effective teachers, D.C. politicians, and parents (Whitmire 2011, 223–24). Because Mayor Fenty, initially very popular in the district, had assured her of political cover, she did not take the time and trouble to build political support for her reforms prior to implementing them. Most importantly, she failed to anticipate that closing schools and replacing existing employees (most of whom were black) with new employees (most of whom were white) would be viewed as unnecessary and offensive by parents, most of whom were African American (Barras 2010; Chaltain 2010). As Whitmire writes,

When Rhee fired central office workers who were embarrassingly bad at their jobs, she assumed D.C. residents would rejoice about better schools coming their way. Instead, many residents saw friends and neighbors losing jobs in a disrespectful manner. (2011, 176)

Former mayor Marion Barry, perhaps the foremost expert on the politics of D.C., warned Rhee of this problem in 2008 when he stated, “Whether or not you and the mayor want to take [the DCPS] out of the political arena, you cannot, because education all over America has political implications … Parents [and fired school employees] are also voters” (quoted in Risen 2008, 8).

To succeed in her seemingly impossible job, Rhee focused solely on the interests of the children. But children do not vote, and her necessary neglect of the interests of adults who were dependent on the school system for their livelihood meant that her operational successes would be short-lived and end with political failure. Fenty failed in his 2010 reelection bid amid controversies that included an investigation into contracts awarded to companies with close ties to the mayor (King 2010). Shortly after city councilman Vincent Gray defeated Mayor Fenty in the September 2010 Democratic Primary, Rhee emerged from a meeting with the presumptive mayor-elect to announce her resignation (Maroney and Young 2010). The loss of her patron, Mayor Fenty, ended the political shield of this zealot, who was sometimes portrayed as a modern Joan of Arc (Kronholz 2010). Rhee quickly followed former mayor Fenty into the private sector, establishing a national advocacy organization that seeks to raise $1 billion for education reform (Mitchell 2010). Mayor-in-waiting Gray then announced that Rhee’s top deputy, Kaya Henderson, who is African American and a multigenerational D.C. resident, would be his new chancellor. Gray thus may have signaled a continuation of Rhee reforms without Rhee herself. In the summer of 2011, Chancellor Henderson fired roughly 5 percent of city teachers based on their IMPACT scores (Turque 2011). In short, as in the case of Bratton, the reformer was forced out, but reforms continued.

Discussion: Why Few Copy the Reformers
What Chancellor Michelle Rhee did for the D.C. school system was very similar to what Commissioner Bratton did for his police force. Each had considerable political support, at least at the onset of their tenure, and each used this influence to increase resources and to recruit and promote talented managers. Each leader sought to make his or her system a learning organization by stressing use of data and pushing subordinates to manage by data. Each stressed accountability and replaced ineffective middle-level leaders.
Why, then, have Rhee’s demonstrably successful approaches not been replicated across the country? In part, the answer to that question mirrors the story of Commissioner Bratton and crime reduction in New York City. The central problem, in our view, is the operational-political dilemma that these leaders face. The strategies that both organizational leaders employed to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of service delivery bore substantial political costs. Smart and savvy superintendents and commissioners likely, and understandably, are shying away from a reform playbook that might win lots of games but also might get them fired.

Is there hope that future agency leaders might be able to avoid, or at least finesse, this operational-political dilemma? We hypothesize that they might be able to do so, for instance, with respect to the strategy of data-based management and accountability. Until passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, frequent student testing was unfamiliar to educators and stirred up considerable controversy. As a longtime education researcher whom we interviewed stated, when Lonnie Crim was in Atlanta … those were different eras in that people didn’t attend to the arithmetic of student achievement the way they do now, or the way they always have in crime statistics. The [crime] metrics have been fairly stable over time. In education the metrics keep changing, and people look at them differently. (telephone interview, July 20, 2010)

Simple unfamiliarity with data meant that, until recently, school superintendents could not rely on academic success to build political support. Because accountability for results does not determine job tenure, superintendents might have eschewed such accountability unless they were able to win over the teachers union (as in the case of Crim) or faced weak teacher unions. Alan Bersin, an outsider with a criminal justice background, implemented moderately aggressive education reforms as superintendent of schools for the San Diego Unified School District, but he kept his job only so long as a pro-reform coalition held the school board and was immediately fired once a pro-union slate took charge (Ravitch 2010). The same dynamic swallowed Michelle Rhee in D.C. We think that a central cause of this problematic disconnect is simply that organizational leaders in many fields, including public education and policing, are still in the process of familiarizing their professional subordinates with the fact and ways that performance measurement can be their ally and not their enemy in their work environment. Thus, the first hypothesis we offer for future exploration is as follows:

**Hypothesis 1:** Over time the increasing penetration of data-driven management into organizational culture will make large-scale, long-lasting agency reform more tenable.

Because of the political environment in which they operate, highly effective urban police commissioners and school superintendents also face the danger of becoming victims of their own successes. If crime is low and test scores high in a city, politicians and the citizens who support them may provide less public support and fewer resources to the organizational leaders who helped create such salient conditions. If one succeeds, one runs the risk of being ignored or viewed as expendable, as political leaders look to solve the next urban problem on the horizon. Why accept painful remedies when the patient does not feel sick? Further, at this point, previously excluded actors may question the centralization of power that enabled success, as African American parents and community members did in the case of Michelle Rhee. A second hypothesis for explicit testing draws from Simon’s (1947) famous concept of “satisficing” behavior:

**Hypothesis 2:** Because the public has only a certain tolerance for the kinds of disruptive strategies that are necessary to substantially improve public outcomes in controversial policy areas such as education and crime control, aggressive reforms and reformers will tend to appear in times and places where outcomes are completely unacceptable and be dismissed or moderated once outcomes reach a merely acceptable level.

An additional way that urban police commissioners and school superintendents can become victims of their own success is by becoming bigger than their britches in the eyes of their employers. In the case of police commissioners, this happens when a city’s top cop becomes more popular than its mayor or is viewed as a possible candidate for the mayor’s job, or both, as in the case of Commissioner Bratton in the 1990s. While it is difficult to think of a city school superintendent who became mayor or governor (only one currently resides in the U.S. Senate), superintendents often get pink slips following turnaround successes when the political composition of the elected school board changes or the board views the superintendent as having amassed too much power and independence.

Yet, because of their temperament and their need to place organizational results ahead of organizational relationships, change agents such as Bratton and Rhee feel compelled to establish a high level of personal control over their organizations. In Down’s terms, they are zealots. This means that they are unlikely to get along, go along, and survive long in highly controversial public agencies, although, as in the cases here, their successful policies are fully implemented and sustained by their more politically savvy successors. It also means that existing organizational leaders, who likely are not true believers in the necessity and efficacy of the aggressive reform approach, will hesitate to embrace such reforms. A third hypothesis that we offer for future consideration is as follows:

**Hypothesis 3:** Organizational innovations in public management will diffuse more through entrepreneurs and their deputies transferring to new places than through adoption by other leaders.
The seeds of reform in urban education and policing may spread, as DiMaggio and Powell (1983) suggest, more through “mimetic” processes such as employee migration rather than through assumption by local leaders. Here it is notable, however, that while former NYPD officials, including Bratton, Timoney, and Gerry McCarthy, have successfully led police departments in other cities, none had quite so much success as at the NYPD, probably because they lacked comparable control over personnel. Similarly, while Michelle Rhee is not the only reformer to have led a school system, others have had less control over personnel and less success. In short, mere migration is not enough; rather, reformers need both legal and secure political control over agency personnel policy. Without these preconditions, few organizational leaders will be attracted to reform programs that consistently perform seemingly impossible jobs quite rare, if not exactly impossible.

Interestingly, NYPD commissioner Bratton seemingly had far more success, in part because the street-level bureaucrats doing police work supported crime reduction and thus could be motivated to support the commissioner’s efforts once they had enjoyed initial success. Given the training of teachers, it is not clear that street-level education bureaucrats have the same beliefs and will be so complicit in disruptive reforms (Chenoweth 2007, 2009; Hirsch 1996). Further, crime prevention does not require the cooperation of clients in quite the same way as education, nor is it as deeply controversial. The reality is that criminals do not vote in nearly the numbers that teachers and parents do.

Unfortunately, other public sector leaders are unlikely to copy the successes of these successful innovators unless or until there are firmer relationships between demonstrated results and individual-level job security or advancement. This will require that the public be educated as to what actually is possible: what is needed to generate successful outcomes and why. Second, when reformers succeed, academic communities need to study those successes and teach future innovators how to copy and refine those models rather than looking the other way, as academics all too often do (Maranto, Redding, and Hess 2009). An essential aspect of that instruction must be the effective understanding and management of an organization’s political environment, as well as its operational environment. Drawing from the seminal work of recently departed James Q. Wilson (1989), an agency’s “critical environmental problem” may, at times, simply be politics.

Acknowledgments

An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2010 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association in Washington, D.C. We wish to thank Christine Ledvinka Rush, Paul G. Lewis, Herman L. Boschken, and three anonymous reviewers for their insights, as well as Michael McShane for his expert research assistance. The usual caveats apply.

Notes

1. Data on police commissioner tenure were not available for Phoenix, Arizona.
2. The bivariate correlation between the annual percentage change in the murder rate (lagged one year) and police commissioner tenure was a Pearson’s R rating of a tiny 0.014.
3. In other words, in order to qualify, the urban area had to outperform the state average for all four populations—fourth graders in math, fourth graders in reading, eighth graders in math, and eighth graders in reading.
4. While there have been serious allegations of cheating on Washington, D.C.’s standardized accountability tests, with school staff changing answers on difficult items, on the NAEP, school staff and students have neither the incentive nor the ability to cheat, making the NAEP a credible measure of school performance in the same way that homicide rates measure police success.

References
