

Gatekeeping and Silos: Exploring Managers' Discretion and the Actions Taken to Avoid Gatekeeping in Blueprint 2020

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Introduction

The bureaucracies of Canada's governments have faced constant calls for growth and change over the past several decades. Public service reform has been espoused from both left- and right-wing governments as an effective electoral campaign platform (Charih & Daniels, 1997). Federally, this has included the 1984 Nielson Task Force, *Public Service 2000* (PS2000), the 1995 Program Review, and the currently in progress, *Blueprint 2020* (BP2020). The common thread of all of these reviews has been modernizing, reforming, and updating the public service to provide better outcomes, better customer service, and better value for taxpayer money. The largest of these reviews prior to BP2020 was PS2000, in which the public service was envisioned as upgrading a number of its policies, procedures, and operations to become a modern, lean, highly-qualified workforce.

Unfortunately, PS2000 failed for many reasons, chief among them the fact that reform decisions were made by senior public services executives with little—sometimes only token—consultation with frontline public servants. First, the executive-imposed values system resulted in a lack of buy-in from employees in defining their workplace. Second, a lack of consultations with employees meant that employees felt left out and excluded from shaping the priorities of the renewal process, again resulting in a subsequent lack of buy-in to reforms. Third, unclear hierarchies and unclear divisions of responsibility resulted in confusion and duplication of work. For example, what role did the Public Service Commission play versus the Treasury Board as the official “employer” of public servants? These failures were clearly recognized and understood in the designing of BP2020, as it is a much more streamlined, transparent, and results-based initiative than PS2000.

However, what was never explicitly discussed was the presence of “gatekeeping” as a major barrier to success in PS2000. Likewise, while “silos” (the rigid vertical structures of an organization) continue to exist, their structure and authority has been challenged in BP2020. As a result, while BP2020 is a major improvement, elements of gatekeeping still persist as a barrier to a fully grassroots-driven policy exercise. Gatekeeping is a major concern as it presents a barrier to creating comprehensive, accurate, and sound government policy. Its presence prevents the best ideas from reaching the appropriate levels of managers who could hear and implement them; it threatens the notion that governing should be evidence-based and that policies should be judged on their effectiveness in accomplishing goals rather than being judged based on the person making the pitch. The effects of gatekeeping can be widely discussed and considered from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, including public administration and organizational theory.

In this two-part series, I define and examine gatekeeping in the Canadian federal public service. In part one, I develop the topic of gatekeeping by examining the circumstances within the federal public service that have both caused and prevented gatekeeping and demonstrate that gatekeeping is an inseparable factor of the public service. First, I define gatekeepers, not by their actions, but by their personal attributes and potential motives for contributing to gatekeeping processes. Second, I examine the genesis of gatekeeping, meaning how it starts, how it is created, and how it continues or is abolished. In part two, I introduce a list of actions that can be considered gatekeeping, with some suggestions on

why they may take place. Next, I discuss how gatekeeping can be combated, especially how it has been combated through various initiatives in the *BP2020* initiative. I conclude with recommendations for further studies on gatekeeping.

The Creation of *BP2020*

BP2020 was initiated in 2012 by the Clerk of the Privy Council, at the time when Wayne Wouters called for “a clear and shared vision of what Canada’s Public Service should become in the decades ahead” (Clerk of the Privy Council of Canada [CPC], 2013a). Three months later the Clerk officially kicked off the initiative with a visionary statement, which defined the ideal end result of what *BP2020* would accomplish (CPC, 2013b). The vision was crafted through consultations with public servants, who were in the early stages of defining the desired end results that would shape the public service reforms. It invoked “enduring values,” such as being professional and non-partisan; working in the public interest; ensuring sound stewardship; and delivering results, as have been seen in previous reforms (CPC, 2013a). The driving force behind these changes, the Clerk said, was to ensure “excellence” in a public service that was being pushed by globalization; increasingly complex work duties; accelerating technological changes; changing demographics; a growing demand for accountability and achieving results as efficiently as possible; and shifting workforce expectations (CPC, 2013a). Although all Canadians are invited to give their feedback and ideas to the Clerk (CPC, 2013c), he notes that it is primarily an exercise by public servants, for public servants.

The Clerk also simultaneously formed the Deputy Minister Board of Management and Public Service Renewal as a way of coordinating reforms across several departments through their senior management. However, unlike *PS2000*, this committee was to serve in a shared stewardship role to ensure coordination between departments rather than unilateral reforms without involving anyone below the rank of deputy minister (CPC, 2013a). The Clerk called on the deputies to “broaden the conversation so that public servants across the country [could] join in” (CPC, 2013a). In this hierarchy, the Clerk creates the overall vision for the public service and the Board collaborates and facilitates ideas that will change their departments in accordance with the vision.

While *BP2020* was intended to be a blueprint for the future of the public service, *Destination 2020* focused on the goals of public service reform (CPC, 2013d). *Blueprint 2020* was the process; *Destination 2020* was the result. The Clerk identified five priority areas for action that would need to be addressed to reform the public service so that the public service was able to meet the challenges of *Blueprint 2020* and *Destination 2020*: innovative practices and networking; processes and empowerment; technology; people management; and the fundamentals of public service. By November 2013, the Clerk provided an interim progress report that demonstrated what he called the broad support of public servants to reform and shape their departments: over 3000 of roughly 262,000 employees had registered for GC Connex, the government’s internal web-based forum for discussions; those employees had created over 120 discussion threads; and the *BP2020* visionary statement had received over 125,000 views on the Clerk’s website (CPC, 2013e). However, with only 1.1 percent of the workforce participating, questions should be raised as to why more employees are not participating. At best, low engagement may indicate that the broader workforce is not interested in participating because they may believe civil service reform is unnecessary; at worst low engagement rates may be a result of disenchantment with *BP2020* being a meaningful civil service reform process. Similarly, participation at best may indicate that there are those who believe their respective input will make valuable contributions to public sector reform. At worst, the employees who are participating could be doing so in a way that appears to be more of a rubber stamp of pre-selected policy changes. It is difficult to interpret why there is such low participation in the *BP2020* process.

With the vision and guiding principles defined, employee engagement and the ideas put forth are left relatively unguided, a risk of which the Clerk must have been aware. Most discussion topics are a combination of manager- and employee-initiated questions, such as “What does the vision mean to you?” and what tools are needed to make the vision a reality. Eventually online discussions are supposed to translate into in-person meetings, where worthy ideas are put to the test and, if suitable, are implemented; the main attraction to *BP2020* is that it is supposed to cultivate ideas based on their merit rather than the rank or status of the person presenting them, whether that person is a deputy minister or entry-level employee. However, there is still an element of gatekeeping in this process, as it relies on self-censorship and group agreement to move ideas forward. For example, employees would be

unlikely to suggest an idea that would be unpopular amongst the group, even if that idea would help the organization as a whole. Likewise, the group would not put forward ideas that would put themselves at a disadvantage to benefit the organization.

Defining the Gatekeepers

I view gatekeeping through the political system's lens of Gareth Morgan's *Images of Organization* (2006). Through this lens, Morgan analyzes "the human factor" in organizational behaviour, arguing that politics and personal motivations are behind many organizations' decisions. Examples include a "union versus management" mentality; managers micro-managing and acting like "dictators;" and various "forms of wheeling and dealing" (Morgan, 2006). These different examples illustrate that organizations are far from being homogeneous entities. Rather, they are political creatures driven by different stakeholders, values, and objectives in the respective organization. I situate gatekeeping within these examples.

Consideration of history's literal gatekeepers is illustrative in defining what modern-day gatekeepers do. When early civilizations began to settle in communities or cities, they erected enormous stone walls to protect the community. Access to the city was only through one gate, manned by a gatekeeper, who was usually appointed directly by the community's leader or mayor. Failure as a gatekeeper, such as opening the gates to hostile military forces, meant that the entire community was put at risk. The term "gatekeeping" is thus a telling one when applied to the public service: it implies the existence of a gate, or barrier, and the establishment of a person to actively manage that gate to protect or maintain the structures and organizational values and work flows of the institutional community. In many cases, the modern gatekeeper *is* the barrier, performing activities that manage the flow of work and information to higher and lower levels of employees. Gatekeeping can be productive and enabling, in that it can maintain the flow of information and organizational values, but increasingly in organizational theory, gatekeeping can also be unproductive by stifling needed organizational change, innovation, and maintaining unproductive silos.

Gatekeepers exist in every workplace, regardless of the type of workplace or the form of work being completed. They may not be referred to as such, but their job responsibilities and position within the organization makes them a gatekeeper of some form. As I explain below, gatekeepers are not inherently bad or negative, either for employees or the organization; they are necessary, especially in organizations with a large workforce and a high degree of breadth and specificity. For the purposes of this discussion, I focus on the gatekeeping role of supervisors and managers in Canada's federal public service between the *PS2000* and *BP2020* initiatives.

Gatekeeping is the personal decision of an employee in deciding what information and work goes up and down the hierarchy and what does not. The delegation of authority to lower ranks can actually be helpful in preventing gatekeeping, as long as it allows for those lower-ranking employees to make decisions and have those decisions respected by the director who delegated his or her authority. Delegation of authority would be pointless if it were met with gatekeeping behaviour, or if it were given with strings attached.

Gatekeepers exist within managerial or supervisory roles, for there would be no gate to keep if they were not given the authority to do so. In other words, they are given a position of authority within the organization to create or maintain a silo structure that requires their input and control. The motives for doing so cannot be fully understood or examined without speaking directly with supervisors and managers who acknowledge doing so, and are thus beyond the scope of this thesis. As an example, journalism saw the proliferation of gatekeeping with the introduction of mass media, creating ambiguity between what was "news," how it should be reported, and how it could be used in some circumstances as a way to threaten and coerce governments and corporations (Salcito, 2009). Members of the media sought to define their use of information along ethical standards and the public's right to know, but their use of information led to governments and corporations creating their own markets for information without having to go through the media to have it reported. As with gatekeeping in the federal public service, journalism sees elements of personal discretion and control over what information is shared and what is not.

Gatekeeping may not only be utilized for personal motives. A higher-level view of gatekeeping is that the organization's structure requires it—the organization's work must be divided and organized to keep

things manageable—as well as the individual’s interpretation of the organizational structure. In the latter example, this means an employee’s beliefs in the workplace culture, the environment in which work is completed, and the existing processes through which policies are developed and implemented. What a director believes is good for the long-term growth or sustainability of the organization may be in competition with what an employee believes would be immediately best for their section’s day-to-day work. Both of these examples as elements of gatekeeping are examined below.

As of March 2012, the Canadian public service employed 278,092 employees (Treasury Board of Canada, 2012). They were led by 6,923 executive members, a number that has tripled since 1983, with 45 percent of them being women. Since 2012, the federal government has reduced the size of the public service, although the ratio of managers and executives to employees is not yet available. The average executive employee was fifty years old and spoke English as his or her primary language, although English as a primary language has been declining and French as a primary language has been increasing. While not a perfect comparison, learning about the executive level of many public service organizations can enable us to learn more about who the gatekeepers are. Since these demographics apply to executive members as a financial category, the definition of gatekeeper is not limited to these individuals, although it certainly includes them.

Gatekeeping is a major concern as it presents a barrier to creating comprehensive, accurate, and sound government policy. Its presence prevents the best ideas from reaching the appropriate levels of managers who could hear and implement them; it threatens the notion that governing should be evidence-based and that policies should be judged on their effectiveness in accomplishing the goal, rather than be judged based on the person making the pitch. Gatekeeping is a factor in federal work environments; it should come under specific scrutiny while undergoing a review of the public service and its processes and policies.

The Federal Environment

To understand gatekeeping and the potential motives for those who engage in it, we must understand the overall picture of the federal public service and the federal government leadership. Canada’s public service has consistently grown in size, from 263,000 in 2008 to 283,000 in 2010. With the economic recession hitting many western countries in 2008 and 2009, public spending budgets were threatened and many agencies and departments received stimulus spending to weather the storm and avoid as many layoffs as possible. Starting in 2011, the size of the public service was reduced to 282,352. The 2012 federal budget announced that 19,200 positions would become “surplus” or redundant over three years: they would be vacated through a combination of attrition (employees dying, retiring, or leaving for other employment) and layoffs (Mackrael, 2012). By April 2014, the number of employees was reduced to 257,138 (Treasury Board of Canada, 2014).

These figures are important to keep in mind when examining gatekeeping. Although the workforce reductions amounted to a reduction of 6.9 percent of the federal public service, the rhetoric surrounding the reduction called it cruel and inhumane (Thompson, 2013). The workforce reductions caused several public service unions to organize rallies and protests and wear partisan “Stephen Harper hates me” buttons while performing their supposedly non-partisan public service duties (CBC News, 2012). The reductions sent a new round of “survivors’ syndrome” through the federal workforce, wherein employees who were retained developed feelings of pity, envy, and jealousy over employees who were deemed surplus (Berglas, 2009). The unions viewed the government’s unilateral downsizing without consulting with them as the avoidance of a long-standing agreement between the government and unions. When employees face workforce reductions and downsizing, they turn their focus away from what is best for the organization or the customer and instead focus on self-preservation (Gandolfi, 2009). The workforce reduction may also be imposed by senior executives who do not understand the front line processes, or who are perhaps acting under the requirement to downsize by a specific percentage of employees without questioning the rationale for that percentage or whether it is appropriate.

How Does Gatekeeping Start?

The existence of silos and gatekeepers is not inherently bad: they are a necessary check on how work is delegated, managed, and completed. But *how* is that work delegated, managed, and completed? Now that we understand a bit about who gatekeepers are and their potential motives, we can begin to understand how gatekeeping starts. Silos are robust vertical structures that establish and enforce a rigid

hierarchy while discouraging or outright banning horizontal structures. They may also be referred to as "stovepipes," which is an especially appropriate metaphor because the fire burns only at the bottom level, and the smoke only rises up, never down. Silos require gatekeepers who will enforce that only selected ideas make it to higher levels of the public service. Vertical organization silos exist in almost every organization, from a small company with 15 employees to enormous multi-national corporations (Kotter International, 2011).

By definition, "horizontal structures" are the opposite of vertical structures: they include initiatives such as direct consultations or collaborating with departments or groups that have similar goals or mandates. For example, two departments' respective human resources (HR) teams meeting to discuss HR practices and find efficiencies that may be mutually beneficial is a horizontal exercise. Vertical structures work best where a rigid chain of command is required for work to be completed effectively and efficiently, while horizontal structures allow for group-based work, sometimes even consensus, where the group's leadership is less pronounced and more focused on end goals and results (Myers, 2014). It is precisely because of the vertical structure's rigidity and strict adherence to the chain of command that some employees may feel that their voices are not heard or respected. Too many silos and gatekeepers can leave lower-level employees feeling devalued and like their respective suggestions have never made it to the people who have the authority to enact changes. However, horizontal structures too can have limitations: for example, they can serve to legitimize already-made decisions introduced by a member of the group, treating the group as a rubber stamp to have the idea "approved" as if it were an organic or grassroots-level decision. Horizontal structures require buy-in and discussion of the ideas being proposed in order for them to function properly, although the merit of horizontal networking is regularly in tension with other organizational priorities, such as the need for more senior managers to be able to discuss the work being done by those below them (Tait, 1996).

The problems with silos cannot be understated. Three major problems that silos create are that they destroy trust, cut off communication, and foster complacency (Kotter International, 2011). Gatekeeping thrives in this environment since gatekeepers derive their power from silos. Reflecting upon senior managers, many employees already cynically remark about gatekeepers and do not even realize it. When one speaks of managers "in their ivory towers" or "on their white horses" while preaching "armchair policies," the employee is recognizing the existing silos that are being maintained by gatekeepers. They are positing the powerful image of the executive on the top floor of the office looking down upon the mere average employees on the office floor. Powerful imagery since it also demonstrates the distance felt between senior managers and ground-level employees. The latter group simply do not feel connected to or represented by the senior managers.

A gatekeeper can occupy many roles in the public service. They may be officially styled as advisors, senior managers, directors, subject matter experts (SMEs), or executive assistants. But their purpose is clear: one does not get to speak to the gatekeeper's boss without going through the gatekeeper. Gatekeeping works in tandem with the creation and maintenance of silos. One's immediate supervisor has the most impact over one's day-to-day life at work, as this supervisor is often the person who sets the employee's work hours, approves or denies vacation leave, assigns work tasks, and writes the employee's performance reviews. This makes gatekeeping especially problematic and political, considering a manager's ability to grant vacation leave could be leveraged to make an employee comply with a manager's requests or a supervisor's refusal to move an employee's idea further up the silo.

Another cause of gatekeeping is geographic. The sheer size of Canada's land mass means that while the federal government is centrally headquartered in Ottawa, it requires regional representatives in locations far away from Ottawa. Approximately 42 percent of the federal workforce and 72 percent of federal executives work in the National Capital Region (Ottawa-Gatineau) (Public Policy Forum, 2007). Regional offices thus form their own chains of command and senior leadership from employees working in the same geographic area. Obviously, this is not a fault of any government, although its embrace or refusal to use technology to close this vast geographical gap as best as possible could contribute to gatekeeping and whether it flourishes or withers away. While both public and private organizations have the responsibility of locating their headquarters where it makes practical sense, public departments have the added responsibility of ensuring regional distribution, making regional headquarters more difficult to move or shutdown.

The Gatekeeping Paradox: An Educated Work Force

One of the reasons problematic forms of gatekeeping can be limited is Canada's highly educated workforce. There may have once been a time when Canada's public service was more sharply divided between the management class and the personal assistant and secretary class, but that time has since passed. In 2013, the Treasury Board noted that there had been significant growth in more "knowledge-intensive" work, comprising "an ever-increasing share of the employee population" (Treasury Board of Canada, 2013). Employees working in fields that included administrative sciences, computer systems, and program administration saw their workload continually increase, requiring a "highly skilled" combination of education and experience. If gatekeeping was once required because the managers were more educated and thus more competent employees, that trend has changed, and today's entry level civil service employees often have significant post-secondary and technical training. Given this highly educated workforce, contemporary employees have legitimate educational and professional experience to offer.

The Tall Climb to the Top

Silos require gatekeepers out of necessity due to the size, complexity, and organization of a department or agency. Gatekeeping and the creation of silos begin as a necessary division of work responsibilities. Public service hierarchies all look relatively similar, but what may be different is the number of levels between ground-level employees and executives. The lack of a clearly defined and organized workforce is one of the contributing factors to gatekeeping because: a) it keeps managers from knowing other managers' mandates, leading to empire- and silo-building and b) it keeps employees from knowing their supervisors' and section mandates, leading to employees keeping work at their level when it should actually be pushed higher or lower.

Gatekeeping begins at the highest levels of bureaucracy, at the minister and deputy minister level. It starts as a simple logistical fact: with approximately 262,902 public servants (Clerk of the Privy Council of Canada, 2013a), but only 39 federal cabinet ministers (including the prime minister) (Parliament of Canada, 2014a) and 28 deputy ministers (not every cabinet minister is responsible for a department) (Parliament of Canada, 2014b), not every deputy minister wants to hear (or is capable of hearing) from 9,389 public servants under him or her; he or she necessarily needs to delegate some of his or her authority to junior-ranking directors. The minister, in his or her role as the head of a department, does not necessarily have the expertise, knowledge, or time to be managing the minute details of running a department such as human resources, financial planning, legal affairs, policy compliance, and communications. He entrusts the deputy minister to advise him on the relevant points and special cases that require the minister's personal attention or approval. But even the deputy minister, as the department's highest-ranking civil servant, does not necessarily have experience in those same operational areas; most often, civil servants are identified for a specific "path" of expertise, for example, one may work in human resources, and remain within that path for the duration of one's career, serving in progressively more senior roles. A deputy minister may be well-versed in legal affairs from her time as another department's chief legal officer, but may not have experience in communications, for example. The result is that senior executives at the top of a pyramid or hierarchy rely on lower-ranking employees to provide them with advice and guidance, and provide them with the delegated authority to fulfill their mandate. This trait continues throughout the hierarchy.

Gatekeeping is also proliferated as an exercise in power and control, especially at the minister and deputy minister levels. Senior managers who organize fiefdoms and create personal empires to wage personal agendas or career ambitions are also responsible for gatekeeping. They create a culture of exclusivity, wrapping themselves in a bubble of "yes-people" who are all but invited to create their own personal hierarchies under the authority of being one of the few with access to that first, senior manager. Because the deputy minister can only speak to so many people in a day, their authority is delegated to many junior-ranking executives. In the public service, these are usually associate or assistant deputy ministers. The conditions are ripe for gatekeeping based on the enormous numbers of civil servants and the diversity of ministries, departments, and programs for which the federal government is responsible. Given the complexity of the civil service, it therefore is reasonable that a senior-level executive is only directly supervising only a few subordinates. This necessity to delegate continues through the hierarchy. The result is that senior managers and executives are called upon for only unique or special circumstances, with most managers making the decision to retain information and cases at their level rather than pushing it higher. This is where gatekeeping begins: in the conscious

choice of an individual to withhold information or work at a specific level when it should actually be communicated or dealt with at a higher or lower level.

This is not to say that all gatekeeping is bad. The broadest definition of gatekeeping would encompass every manager and every executive employee. Inherent in their actions is some form of decision making on whether a person at their level can deal with a file or whether it requires a decision from a more senior employee. What I am concerned with is not every day productive gatekeeping that enables the organization to function effectively, but the gatekeeping that can be interpreted through a political lens to suppress information, divide the workforce, or maintain silos when they should actually be torn down.

The Top: Ministerial and Prime Ministerial Leadership

As long as we are discussing the highest ranks in the federal public service, we should also take the time to examine its political leadership. From 2006 to 2015 Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper led the Canadian government. Prime Minister Harper and his Conservative government have been polarizing figures in the public service. Right-wing political parties have been typically typecast as being in favour of large corporations and managers, while left-wing parties have been typecast as the parties of the unions and workers. During their time in office there was no shortage of rhetoric that fit these stereotypes of the Conservative government's purported "hidden agenda" to fire federal workers and cripple unions. As of 2012, 71 percent of Canada's public servants were unionized, and while unions are increasingly representing employees, the density of unionized versus non-unionized employees is dropping, especially in the private sector (CBC News, 2012). Unionized employees typically favour left-wing parties such as the New Democratic Party (NDP), as illustrated by their unions' sponsorship of NDP conferences (Kirkup, 2011).

It was under the Harper government that the *BP2020* initiative was introduced. From a union's perspective, by introducing a vision intended to align the public sector with the private sector, the government imposed a top-down vision that should have been vetted through different (union) hierarchies (May, 2014a). Unions cynically view the public service's renewal as a way of centralizing decision-making, which is the exact opposite of the Blueprint's stated objectives. Broadly, the entire *BP2020* exercise could be interpreted as a way of bypassing hundreds of union gatekeepers, who would filter employees' concerns before collaborating and making demands of their own. However, bypassing union hierarchies also means bypassing hundreds of managers and executives in the process as well. The government demonstrates a preference for going directly to employees to consult and gain their feedback, utilizing technology to usurp union and management leaders who were previously called upon to fulfill that role. This behaviour risks re-opening the fundamental mistrust and divide between political leaders and the bureaucracy; a divide that the Privy Council Clerk insists does not exist (May, 2014b) but that others claim has been growing since the Conservatives took office (Jeffrey, 2011).

The political leadership, being at the top of the hierarchy, has an important role to play in creating a culture of innovation, creativity, and business process innovation that seeks to avoid gatekeeping. One of the failures of *PS2000* was that it was exclusively designed at the executive level, below the politicians but above the majority of employees who could have given their input. Political leaders have the responsibility to ensure gatekeeping does not happen, and that changes are made at the grassroots level wherever possible.

Conclusion

In this first article, I have defined gatekeeping and examined how it applies to the current *BP2020* initiative. *BP2020* should be considered a major success in learning from the shortcomings and failures of the *PS2000* initiative. Through employee engagement and feedback, *BP2020* corrected a number of previous issues that resulted in a lack of clear direction or buy-in from the very employees who would be embracing and implementing change. However, the potential for gatekeeping continues to exist, especially as a little-understood factor in managers' discretion and ability to assign work.

In my next article, I will further expand upon my definition of gatekeeping with specific examples of gatekeeping. I will also discuss how the creators of *BP2020* have engineered that initiative to avoid some of the same pitfalls of the previous *PS2000* initiative. I will conclude my second article with suggestions of further studies into gatekeeping and its effects on government organizations.

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