

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

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## Abstract

This is part two of a two-part series that aims to define gatekeeping and examine its presence and effects on the Canadian federal public service. Read Part One at:

<http://jis.athabascau.ca/index.php/jis/article/view/195/322>.

This thesis defines and explores gatekeeping within the Canadian public service in the context of the Blueprint 2020 (BP2020) public service renewal initiative. The author defines gatekeeping as “the personal decision of an employee in deciding what information and work goes up and down the hierarchy and what does not” and uses this definition to explore the role managers play in dividing and suppressing information (gatekeeping) that should flow through the manager, both to lower-level employees and higher-ranking executives.

**Keywords:** *Gatekeeping, Gatekeeper, Public Service 2000 (PS2000), Blueprint 2020 (BP2020), Wayne Wouters, Stephen Harper, Privy Council of Canada.*

## Introduction

In the first part of this two-part series (Dickin, 2016), I defined gatekeeping and examined some of the issues surrounding the business processes of public service renewal in Blueprint 2020 (BP2020). BP2020 was launched in 2012 by then-Clerk of the Privy Council Wayne Wouters and endorsed by then-Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Its open-source design allows for public servants at any level to provide input in person and on internet discussion forums.

To review, gatekeeping is the personal decision of an employee in deciding what information and work goes up and down the hierarchy and what does not. Gatekeeping is necessary in any large

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organization as employees manage the flow of work; however, it presents problems in that personal discretion can create issues in developing what is best for the organization. “Gatekeeper” harkens back to when early civilizations began to settle in communities or cities and 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, organizational values, and work flows of the institutional community.

While the first part of this series focused on how *BP2020* was designed to overcome or avoid the pitfalls of *Public Service 2000 (PS2000)*, this article will examine some of the issues with personal interventions and the types of gatekeeping. I will first discuss the reasons for gatekeeping, especially as they relate to the personal discretion and decision of managers. I will second define some specific examples of gatekeeping. I will third note some of the ways in which gatekeeping can be combated both in the current design of *BP2020* and in ways future renewal initiatives may be designed. I will conclude with recommendations for future studies that can further examine gatekeeping and its role in the federal public service.

### **Reasons for Gatekeeping**

Gatekeeping in today’s public service is focused on protectionist measures to preserve one’s job. Gatekeeping begins very close to home for many public servants, because they feel any work they do will need to justify their continued importance with a department. This is only amplified as suggestions and advice go higher within a department’s bureaucracy. A suggestion to modernize processes or develop a new program at the bottom level of the civil service may very well be an excellent suggestion—one that is desperately needed. Yet, the suggestion only gets so high on the ladder before political questions start being asked, like: “Why didn’t I think of that?”; “Is this program giving my authority to someone else?”; “Does this idea make it seem like I missed something?”; “Do I still have a place here if this service is adopted?”; “Will my boss look down

on me if my subordinate outshines me?” and so on. An idea that might be the best, most revolutionary concept in the world has no chance of success if it is vetted at every level by workers selfishly watching out for their respective jobs, rather than making decisions on what is best for the organization, which could include workforce reductions and restructuring.

There are other considerations beyond the preservation of jobs. If one does not trust the stated objectives of the proposed idea, questions could emerge about whether the reforms are actually intended to produce better services or simply to keep everyone busy while ignoring more important, systemic issues. Through its objectives, vision, and mandate, the renewal process is also inherently contributing to gatekeeping by filtering ideas for change into those that match the vision and mandate. The vision establishes the values of the renewal exercise and demonstrates certain priorities over other objectives. It is possible that incremental, minor fixes may be favoured over large, more expensive reforms, even if the larger reforms could provide better services. Thus, gatekeeping is embedded in the very system of reform as a way of filtering out ideas or potentially effective organizational change.

### **Forms of Gatekeeping**

There are several forms of gatekeeping that take place in the federal public service. Some of these are instituted by legislative requirements, while others are due to individual managers taking on gatekeeping roles. While it is difficult to prove an individual’s motivation for gatekeeping, it is possible to evaluate and recognize gatekeeping behaviours in action. Here, I will limit the examples to specific outcomes rather than potential motivations.

**Limited passage of information and requests up and down:** In the first example of gatekeeping, the supervisor literally acts as a gatekeeper. Here, the supervisor inserts himself or herself as an intermediary between an employee and a higher-level employee. Sometimes this is a valid requirement of the position: for example, to ensure the employee’s work is accurate before it is sent on to someone of a higher rank. Other times, however, it is a method of controlling employees’ work for political purposes by requiring that they go through a middle-filter process before reaching a higher-level manager. Perhaps the middle manager was once a valid check within the

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hierarchy, or perhaps the position is still valid for some responsibilities, but the middle manager may use the excuse of “mission-creep” to justify new, broader powers. This example could still exist in *BP2020*: managers may give direction to employees to not participate in the reform exercise, thereby circumventing the intent of the reform process, even though higher-ranking managers could be supportive of the employees’ engagement.

**Refusal to delegate duties and responsibilities downward:** In a second example of gatekeeping, a manager removes as much discretion from the employees as possible, holding the assignment of work duties at the managerial level and only selectively giving it to other employees. Some work may legitimately require a supervisor’s attention, or may require a specific skill that only the supervisor has; however, another reason could be to retain the information until it can be selectively handed out, and supervised very closely by the manager to ensure its completeness and accuracy (micromanaging). This is an example of gatekeeping because it places managers’ importance and position against subordinate employees’ potential growth and development. The manager has self-imposed that the work stay at his or her level as a way of justifying his or her own workload to the detriment of their subordinates. *BP2020* may exacerbate this form of gatekeeping due to internal workload reviews. For example, managers who feel threatened or challenged in their positions may keep more work at their level as a way of justifying their employment and position. They may argue that they have a special skill or expertise required to handle the position’s workload that may not be held by lower-ranking employees.

**The meeting before the meeting:** In an attempt to break down silos and avoid gatekeeping, senior managers may create opportunities to receive feedback directly from ground-level employees. These may be billed as face-to-face town hall meetings, boss’s hour, coffee hour, feedback cards/emails, anonymous surveys, or a number of other initiatives. Regardless of the title, the meeting’s purpose is to avoid the problem of gatekeeping and silo building: sometimes ground-level employees see and hear things in their line of work, of importance to executives, but for the reasons laid out in this two-part series, these ideas do not make it to the executive’s level. However, these opportunities for meetings between executive and lower-level employees may be preceded by “the meeting before the meeting.” In this example, employees who are being asked for their

feedback are “briefed,” warned, or reminded by their supervisors about the “appropriate” way that a complaint or issue should be brought up to the senior manager calling the meeting. The preamble may differ, but the intent is the same: to ensure employees know that raising inappropriate concerns to high-ranking department members may have consequences.

This is an example of gatekeeping because it does not resolve an issue or complaint; it merely suppresses it from public view. Senior managers are also partly to blame for facilitating and allowing such a culture to persist: announcing these meetings weeks and months in advance gives supervisors ample time to develop rules that will define what is appropriate and what is not to discuss with the senior manager. If senior managers held unannounced meetings, simply saying, “let’s have a meeting now” may go a long way in defeating gatekeeping. However, this approach also has its limitations in that individuals may feel rushed or pressured to conform to organizational norms at an ad-hoc meeting. Additionally, unannounced meetings may not work for formulating broad change in large organizations, where management may be needed to facilitate input. However, it would also help if complaints against individual gatekeepers could be discussed without gatekeeping persons being physically present in the room. In BP2020, this may still occur if managers are not giving employees an appropriate amount of time to attend focus groups and meetings, again, despite higher-ranking managers’ stated support for such meetings. Managers may also attempt to influence what employees discuss or ideas that are brought to that meeting through some of the other mechanisms previously introduced.

**The meeting after the meeting:** Many employees leave a town hall meeting or coffee hour with an executive member feeling proud, hopeful, and empowered. In instances where problems have been brought up, to the chagrin of the gatekeepers, the executive is usually quick to promise changes, or at least that the issue will be considered and further studied. Following the meeting, after the senior manager has left, the gatekeeper re-asserts his or her role, perhaps by casting doubt on the “review” process. In the case of employees who did not pay attention to the meeting before the meeting, the review process may also come in the form of formal or informal disciplinary actions. Once again, the result is the same: the gatekeeper is asserting his or her position as one of power between subordinates and superiors, and is suppressing concerns and potential for

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productive change. The potential for meetings after meetings remains in *BP2020*, as managers may wish to “follow up” on what was discussed during meetings or consultation settings, or quash any potential ideas that may have been discussed before they are fully matured and formed. In this example, the gatekeeper is also serving as a check on the policy implementation process, refusing to push a policy forward until certain conditions meet the manager’s satisfaction.

**Improper use of town hall meetings and merit-based idea systems:** The advantage to holding town hall meetings is that they allow for employees’ feedback based on merit and honesty rather than justification and protection of the status quo. As mentioned earlier, a town hall meeting could be used for the purposes of creating the semblance of grassroots consensus, when, in reality, its purpose was to provide the appearance of a democratic, consensus-based decision that had already been decided before the meeting. Indeed, so-called “policy-making by Dragon’s Den” (Fekete, 2014) allows for ideas to be placed directly in front of decision-makers, who either do or do not buy into the proposed idea on the merits of the idea’s sponsor. This utilizes the merit of the raw idea, although the Dragon’s Den itself still has a built-in gatekeeping element, since ideas are not instantly implemented, but rather promises are made to further study or evaluate the idea. Dragon’s Den-style events eliminate gatekeeping by flattening the organization: the person with the idea is given direct access to the gatekeeper who presumably has the authority to implement the idea if he or she likes it; there is no other input from advisors or gatekeepers (Fekete, 2014).

Town hall meetings may also impose gatekeeping by limiting what is appropriate and allowable for discussion at that meeting, which can stifle potentially embarrassing (but helpful) criticisms from being discussed. This relies on the individual’s desire to conform to what the organization deems as acceptable and normal, even if the individual feels he or she has an idea worth sharing with the group. *BP2020* relies on group settings to discuss and promote policy reforms, which can suppress what employees would actually say in another forum. Therefore, town hall meetings should be used in conjunction with smaller, more personal meetings.

**Report suppression:** In a final example of gatekeeping for this two-part series, government reports or statistics are suppressed and not released as public information. One example was the government’s alleged “suppression” of scientists’ studies and reports that were not consistent with

the government’s political and economic positions. The scientists claimed they were being “muzzled” because of their departments’ publishing venues, or because they felt there was excessive meddling from departmental communications staff when the scientists would want to discuss their studies in the media (Shendruk, 2013). The government’s position is that the scientists are not being muzzled; that the work and reports belong to the federal government, and therefore its use and publication is subject to the various departments’ wishes. Others allege that they are prevented from speaking about their research to the media (Gatehouse, 2013). These are two forms of gatekeeping: first, the researchers consider it part of their scientific responsibility to discuss their findings in public, even if they are later proven wrong or incomplete. Second, pushing the report’s release to higher levels and having it handled by public affairs officials means a greater risk of the report becoming watered down, dogmatic, or generic. The risk of BP2020 reports being suppressed on a larger scale would mean that the input given at the employees’ level could be disregarded if the suggestions did not fit with broader governmental reforms and beliefs. The result, similar to PS2000, would be that employees were consulted but that their ideas were summarily dismissed at higher levels.

These are just a few examples of gatekeeping. This is not an exhaustive list, but rather what I hope will be the beginning of the creation of a much larger list that further defines gatekeeping and expands upon its potential causes and uses. Of course, there are numerous variables that contribute to gatekeeping and allow it to persist. This list does not include potential factors such as a manager’s intimidation of another employee, since there is limited public information available on this and its effects.

### **Combating Gatekeeping**

The *BP2020* process was created in an attempt to address gatekeeping concerns: it promotes an “open, networked environment that engages citizens and partners for the public good,” and “a modern workplace that makes smart use of new technologies to improve networking, access to data, and customer service” (Clerk of the Privy Council of Canada [CPC], 2013, p.5). Behind these statements is the desire to limit the influence of unions, managers, and mid-level gatekeepers and allow for the open flow of ideas based on their merit. Even if gatekeeping was not explicitly

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mentioned, a number of descriptors about the renewal initiative made it clear that it would be results-based and not processed through organizational silos. Indeed, some senior department managers are some of the strongest stated advocates of breaking down gatekeeping. They recognize that with an educated and connected workforce they need to engage employees directly without having to go through numerous filtered protectionist layers. Thus, in learning from the lessons of *PS2000*, *BP2020* was specifically engineered to avoid gatekeepers and engage directly with employees.

### ***GC Connex***

As mentioned in part one of this series, GC Connex was launched as an online collaboration tool for all federal public servants to give their respective feedback for the *BP2020* initiative. Gathering in groups based on topic, department, section, or any other type of division, civil servants, regardless of their position or rank, are invited to share ideas and give feedback through an internal internet-based set of forums. This internet-based approach is helpful as it allows for public servants to provide their respective feedback in a central forum, meaning it can be done at any time, from anywhere, with a government computer. This approach takes away some of the logistics of planning a large in-person meeting, and enables employees who may be intimidated by making in-person statements to compose and review statements before they are posted. It also allows employees to horizontally network in ways that would otherwise be difficult to coordinate. For example, all communications employees from government departments could create their own group to discuss issues and best practices. However, employees are still required to register with their real names and department work email addresses, meaning the feedback would not be anonymous. This means that written suggestions are recorded; the fact that employees’ suggestions are permanently recorded could make some employees reluctant to participate if they fear that a supervisor could be using the written suggestions against the person making them.

### ***Use of Social Media***

Perhaps the best potential for breaking down gatekeeping and silos stems from the proliferation of social media and electronic means of communication. The use of publicly- and instantly-viewable

social media is an enormous risk to gatekeepers. In fact, while the then-Privy Council Clerk did not define what specific risks might come from using social media to solicit feedback, he did acknowledge that “the risk was well worth it” (CPC, 2013, p.1). The risk of using social media is that employees can communicate from anywhere, about anything, to anyone. It means they could express themselves without a filter, which, while certainly raising the risk associated with doing so, also meant that the gatekeeping filter would not be applied to an employee’s comments before being received. *BP2020* encourages employees to utilize social media in discussing of their ideas, but, in doing so, also requires that employees self-regulate.

Those risks encompass the admittedly “unorthodox” approach that the then-Privy Council Clerk took by suggesting that all public servants contact him directly via Facebook, Twitter (@BlueprintGC2020), GC Connex, internal Wiki pages, email or a phone call. In utilizing this approach, the Clerk bypassed hundreds of gatekeepers and received feedback directly from public servants. There was no longer a filter at each level that manipulated the feedback from the ground level into something that was less critical and more neutral sounding. Wouters disempowered gatekeepers by going directly to those best able to give their feedback.

It is unknown whether Wouters actually received and read or listened to every tweet, email, or phone call. It is likely the case that Wouters’ office team assigned individuals to receive and categorize communications with the Clerk’s office and then report the suggestions to the Clerk. The process is typical of most public offices using social media. However, some public figures, such as then-Conservative Members of Parliament, Eve Adams and Royal Galipeau and the late Toronto Mayor Rob Ford, were singled out for providing their personal contact information and directly responding to constituents, so it is possible that Wouters personally used and responded to social media comments.

In August 2014, Wayne Wouters announced his retirement. He had a 37-year career in the public service, five of which were served as the Clerk of the Privy Council. Wouters’ retirement and the appointment of his replacement —Janice Charette — will allow for studies into the personal impact Wouters had in implementing and facilitating *BP2020*. If Wouters succeeds in creating a

culture of change, innovation, and growth, then we can expect that legacy to live on, regardless of who is in charge.

### **Employee Empowerment**

One of the end goals of the *BP2020* process is employee empowerment. The then-Clerk of the Privy Council noted, “employees are looking for greater empowerment at the individual level and reduced hierarchy” (CPC, 2013, p.6). In other words, they are seeking fewer levels of approval between employees and decision makers; they are seeking authority that has been delegated to the lowest-possible level. They are acknowledging gatekeepers and saying they should be avoided in favour of faster processes. “Empowerment” and “employee discretion” are not new buzzwords to *BP2020*, but they need to be considered in the context of gatekeeping. Will pushing the decision-making authority to lower levels eliminate gatekeeping, or simply concentrate power in a lower-ranking manager?

### **Conclusion**

While *BP2020* has excelled at breaking down silos and avoiding gatekeeping, gatekeeping is still a force in the federal public service. My hope is that this two-part series on gatekeeping, its characteristics, and its effects on the federal government workforce is the start of a larger body of studies on management discretion and empowering employees on the basis of their ideas rather than their rank or seniority.

Throughout this two-part discussion, I have introduced the topic of gatekeeping in the federal public service by examining the circumstances within the federal public service that have caused and prevented gatekeeping. I first defined gatekeepers by examining their personal attributes and potential motives for contributing to gatekeeping. I second examined the genesis of gatekeeping: how it started, how it is created, and how it continues or is abolished. I third introduced a list of actions that can be considered gatekeeping, with some suggestions on why they may take place. I fourth discussed how gatekeeping can be combated, especially how it has been combated through various initiatives in the *BP2020* initiative. Finally, I will conclude with some remarks on potential future studies of this topic.

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Gatekeeping in the federal public service has emerged as a topic in some media, but before this series, has not been given the academic attention it deserves. For example, a recent article decried “communications gatekeepers”: communications and public affairs advisors who liaise with media officials about their departments (Hume, 2014). In that article, the advisors are criticized for being gatekeepers who control and limit communications with the actual subject matter experts, acting as a filter between decision makers and reporters. The existence of gatekeeping between the government and the media is a ripe topic for further exploration.

This two-part series has focused on gatekeeping and silo-building in the federal public service as just one example of a way to begin the discussion. There are, without a doubt, countless other examples of gatekeeping in other government departments and agencies, in every private company, and in every charity or non-profit organization. Future studies should examine whether gatekeeping is more prolific, for example, in public organizations over private or non-profit ones; whether one sector is closer to abolishing or at least acknowledging gatekeeping; and whether the driving forces behind gatekeeping can be accommodated through employee collaboration and engagement. To that end, future studies would be useful to codify forms of gatekeeping using direct surveys with public servants. Future studies should also seek to further define the gatekeeper in terms of his or her demographics, work approach, sex, race, and background in order to best define who a gatekeeper is and his or her potential motives.

In its worst form, gatekeeping creates a toxic work environment where political decisions are made with regard to how work is approached and completed. There is no room for such political decisions during a time of fiscal restraint and workforce reductions. However, those very realities have driven employees to look inwards, to justify their positions as a means of survival rather than performing in the best interests of the taxpayers and the departments. When this culture shift happens, individuals, organizations, taxpayers, and the government as a whole suffer. Public administration is a constant process, a never-ending cycle of new ideas and programs, evaluations of those programs, and the amendment or cancellation of those programs. To this end, gatekeeping may never be abolished, but it should be consciously considered and accommodated as a reality of any workplace environment.

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