

Training and Articulating Public Agencies in Argentina

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INTRODUCTION

The deep institutional crisis the Argentine state has gone through has led the Heads of the Public Management Training Program (Instituto Nacional de Administración Pública (INAP)) to question the usual way of facing reforms and training policies. Thus, the design of the activities within this program has been carried out from a knowledge management perspective. According to this approach, professional state forums (PSFs) were created in 2002. These PSFs' practices followed the CoPs and networks conception; their main goals were strengthening public organizations and upgrading professional standards.

The PSFs involve public executives who focus on specific practices. These PSFs can cut across agencies or function at an internal level. Their members essentially seek to develop their competencies in the practice considered. In order to recognize the PSFs/CoPs, previous analysis was done regarding the way each process or task is performed in each agency.

BACKGROUND

Context

The reform conceived for the Argentine State in the 1990s was partially implemented—only to privatizations and downsizing in public agencies. Despite official announcements, less attention was given to the training and to the recruitment of professionals. Instead, recruitment was organized mainly around political “cronism.” Likewise, the use of resources was hindered by political mismanagement.

Ironically, this limited “reform” seemed to be working by the mid-1990s, fed by an overabundance of foreign funding (by multilateral organizations) and political oversight with regards to the public debt that was being accrued.

As a consequence of the political crisis (December, 2001), INAP came forward with the following diagnosis:

1. The rule was that public institutions were fragmented and isolated due to the constant changes of organizational structures encouraged by international agencies.
2. Within this lack of institutional framework, it was too difficult to establish the kind of competencies that were required.
3. Up until December 2001, INAP only offered “packaged courses,” which did not regard the agencies' needs.

In response to the existing crisis, INAP developed a program whose strategic goals were:

1. to foster articulation at an institutional level;
2. to promote organizational learning;
3. to encourage CoPs; and
4. to recognize, sustain, and build knowledge as a policy and practice for modernizing the state.

Knowledge Management and CoPs

INAP has adopted Logan's (1997) definition, which suggests that:

Knowledge management is the organizational activity of creating the social environment and technical infrastructure so that knowledge can be accessed, shared, and created. (p. 23)

Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) posit that organizational knowledge is created through a continuous and dynamic interpersonal interaction between tacit and explicit knowledge. While tacit knowledge is personal and difficult to communicate, explicit knowledge is transmittable in systematic language. In an interview (Scharmer, 1996), Nonaka stated:

This interaction between the two types of knowledge brings about what we call four modes of knowledge conversion—that is, socialization (from individual tacit knowledge to group tacit knowledge), externalization (from tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge), combination (from separate explicit knowledge to systemic explicit knowledge), and internalization (from explicit knowledge to tacit knowledge). (p. 4)

INAP developed two types of practices:

1. *CoP forums* (turning tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge); and
2. *good practices* research (mainly technological), generating knowledge databases for CoP members to share.

The conception of CoPs describes groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and who interact regularly to learn how to do it better (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Cohendet & Creplet, 2001). CoPs constitute an effective way of dealing with unusual problems, sharing knowledge beyond the border of traditional structures (Tuomi, 1999). In Argentina the chaotic condition of government structures, added to the weak administrative career, played a strong role in choosing this strategy.

Bureaucratic Models and CoPs

Through the PSFs, members of public agencies tried to solve some of the increasing bureaucratic drawbacks, such as:

1. lack of shared effort and a tendency towards fragmentation,
2. reduced capacity to integrate innovation,
3. censorship related to such innovation,
4. self-centeredness and isolation, and

5. low self-esteem and low social standing of the public officials.

Some current government policies encourage CoPs as strategic lines of action as in Canada (www.communities-collectivites.gc.ca), the United States (www.gsa.gov/collab), Australia (www.agimo.gov.au), and other countries. These policies are oriented towards reinforcing federal policies, as well as supporting government structures in complex processes.

Referring to U.S. experiences, Snyder and Souza Briggs (2003) state:

For a variety of reasons, the federal government is uniquely positioned to help foster the evolution of nation-scale community-of-practice networks through five principal mechanisms: (1) leveraging infrastructure efficiency; (2) promoting agency learning and alignment; (3) diffusing learning and innovation across states and nations; (4) establishing standards for measuring performance outcomes; and (5) modeling an approach for diffusing ideas and methods that can be used at state and local levels. (p. 64)

The developments implemented by the above-mentioned administrations have key government authorities as their sponsors. Such was the case with Al Gore in the U.S. when he was the vice-president of that country (“Reinventing Government,” 1998). Conversely, in Argentina, this initiative stems from the Public Management Undersecretariat and INAP (a mere public office depending on the latter). In view of this categorization, it is difficult to undertake a political strategy as strong as in the previously mentioned countries.

As the PSFs started growing, conflicts arose with the existing political authorities. Both sectors had different logical ways of thinking as well as different focuses of interest. As far as CoPs were concerned, their goal was to solve daily issues associated to their needs or professional practices. The CoPs within the state were driven by a technical rationality aimed at solving difficulties in management. By contrast, for most political authorities, their main interest lay in their party relationships, political commitments, and state agenda. With respect to the

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