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# Personnel resistance in public sector reform

**A paper to the IRSPM conference 2010 in Bern**

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## ABSTRACT

Observations from three case studies of public sector reforms are reported. These observations concern managerial attitudes to personnel resistance, and they reveal how management talks of resistance either as an emotional reaction or as a personality trait with certain employees. Based on these assumptions it is considered legitimate to disregard employee objections. Personnel were invited to the managerial decision making process, but this functioned rather as therapy than as a channel for actual employee influence. Findings are problematic, because they challenge the ethics of the public official in modern democracies and hinder attempts at whistle-blowing. A framework distinguishing between four interpretations of resistance and corresponding decision making strategies is suggested. The framework can be used to understand and discuss different interpretations of resistance and choices pertaining to employee influence in the decision making process. It also highlights important differences as concerns how resistance tends to be understood in change management theory, as compared to how it must be understood in order to allow whistle-blowing in public sector reform.

Key words: resistance, public management, reform, whistle-blowing, decision making, ethics

## INTRODUCTION

Public sector reforms have become increasingly common, partly as a consequence of the growing pressure on public funds. These reforms are partly influenced by private sector norms and by the values of New Public Management, both as concerns strategy and as concerns implementation. In change management theory, personnel resistance has been identified as a common phenomenon that tends to hinder a successful implementation. Personnel resistance is commonly understood as employee opposition (Larsson, 1990; Bringselius, 2008).

At the same time, there is another stream of thought in political science that emphasizes the importance of recognizing the content of employee objections. Opportunities for whistle-blowing are considered vital (Miceli, Near, & Morehead Dworkin, 2008) and the public official is called a “guardian of democracy” (Lundquist, 2001). The public sector employee is expected to be loyal both to society (the citizen) and to the employer. These loyalties may cause conflict, as described in whistle-blowing theory.

Although change management theory is adopted in both public and private sector, and although it claims to be valid in both these contexts, there has been little discussion on the different conditions pertaining to resistance in these sectors.

This paper focuses on this personnel resistance in public sector reform. It builds upon observations from three public sector reforms in Sweden. In all three cases, personnel experienced that their objections were waved aside by management as irrational and emotional. This way, a process with limited personnel influence was legitimized. The decision-making process became increasingly centralized. Criticism was ignored also when employees wanted to inform management that legislation was violated. Critics risked sanctions, and sometimes critical employees were even encouraged or forced to leave. Managerial promises were broken, and union protests were ignored.

The reforms were followed by considerable problems pertaining to administration, productivity and employee dissatisfaction. One of the reforms is still being implemented, thus it is too early for a full evaluation.

*The aim of this paper is to report on managerial attitudes to personnel resistance in three public sector reforms and to discuss how these observations can be understood.*

Personnel resistance is understood as employee objections. Primarily change management theory (business administration) is employed, and an inductive research approach is adopted.

The paper is structured as follows. The method adopted in the three case studies is depicted in the first section. Empirical findings are then reported. A theoretical discussion of the empirical observations follows, and finally there is a section with conclusions.

## METHOD

A primarily inductive method has been adopted, based on observations from three case studies. All three agencies have different principals: In the NAO case this is Parliament, in the SIA case this is Government, and in the SUS case this is the County (regional) Council. A qualitative method with extensive document studies has been conducted in all three cases. In the SUS case, findings are based primarily on document studies. Each case study and the adopted method is briefly introduced in the following.

The first case study is the reform of the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (SIA). This started out with the merger of 21 local and semi-independent insurance offices around the country and the National Social Insurance Board (in Swedish *Riksförsäkringsverket*) in 2005. The aim was to increase the legal security of citizens by standardizing the processing of requests for social insurance payments.

The SIA case study was conducted within the realm of the research program “Out of many, one?” at Lund University in Sweden, financed by the SIA itself. In total 73 interviews have been conducted in this program, which is not yet concluded, during the period 2008-2009. These have primarily been semi-structured with open-ended questions, and they are complemented by extensive document studies.

The second case study is the reform of the National Audit Office (NAO) in Sweden (this is also called a Supreme Audit Institution, SAI), in 2003. This involved a merger of the two previous NAO, and the primary purpose was to form an *independent* NAO in accordance with international standards.

The NAO case study was conducted during a five year period, starting 2002. In total 92 interviews were conducted at different points in time during this period, and with different parts of the organization. The study included several interviews with the management team, i.e. the three Auditor-Generals. Observations were reported in a rather detailed manner by Bringselius (2008).

The third case study is the reform of the two university hospitals in Malmö and Lund, in the South of Sweden. The new hospital is called the Southern Sweden University Hospital (SUS). The reform started out with what was called a “coordination” of operations in the two hospitals, but this actually included the merger of several clinics. In December 2009, a decision was made by the county council (in Swedish *Region Skåne*) to merge the two hospitals on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January, 2010.

The SUS case study is based primarily on document studies. Two interviews have also been conducted. There is an extensive documentation on the implementation of this reform, where documents have been openly available on the Internet. This is partly as a consequence of Swedish legislation that stipulates that the documentation of public agencies should be available for public scrutiny (in Swedish *offentlighetsprincipen*).

## EMPIRICAL OBSERVATIONS

Some empirical observations as concerns attitudes to personnel resistance, are reported in this section. Observations originate from case studies of the SIA, NAO and SUS reforms in Sweden.

The three reforms were similar in several regards. They all included mergers, and they all had been the subjects of political conflict for decades, before a decision finally could be made. Furthermore, all three reforms have resulted in vast protests from the organizations as well as from society. In directives, a participative approach involving personnel and unions was requested. In early merger plans, goals such as “top class”, “full citizen confidence”, and “work place satisfaction”, were emphasized. What emerged was rather the opposite. The merger processes that followed were prone with problems. There were extensive dissatisfaction among personnel and many serious administrative problems. In the SUS case, the reform has only recently been implemented and it is too early for a more comprehensive and formal evaluation. In the NAO merger, as well as the SIA merger, both the media and audit agencies made many critical reports on how the reforms were implemented. Costs soared. In evaluations, Parliament and Government have been highly critical to the way that these reforms have been managed. In the SIA case, the Director-General was replaced. This was not possible in the new NAO, because of its independent position.

### ***The SIA case***

The SIA reform was organized around a central “Change Program”, where new routines were elaborated. These routines were then sent out to the organization, and employees were requested to adopt them in their everyday work. Employees experienced that they had very little influence, and they were critical to both the way that the reform was implemented, and some of the decisions that were made pertaining to the content of these changes.

A manager called the reform “a revolution” (Swedish, more specific: *palatsrevolution*), explaining that they had been forced to tear everything down in order to create a new and better agency. The same manager, who was in charge of one of the three major branches of the agency’s operations, explained (interview, March 17, 2008) how some employees were less apt to accept change. This especially characterized those employees who had worked at the SIA for a long time and lacked a higher education, he explained.

He continued, and explained that it was perfectly normal that changes caused resistance; “I think it is silly to think that these things should not create resistance.”. He described a four step process, where resistance eventually was overcome and change accepted, adding:

*“This is the way that change programs normally look and this is the way that the process has been also here. I think that we are pretty normal in this regard.”*

He explained that there is no such thing as bottom-up changes, “that does not work”. In his view, management team could understand the need for change better than personnel; “Employees do not see as far as the management team does – and it is not their job to do so.”

In the in-house magazine (*Dagens Socialförsäkring*, 2006/06:19), a psychologist was interviewed under the heading “How can we cope with the changeover?”. She emphasized the importance of employees meeting with their managers to talk about how they felt, adding that:

*“In times of anxiety, people often act irrationally. It then easily happens that scapegoats are sought”.*

Employees reported that this in-house magazine was informally called Pravda, because its content was considered strongly biased in favor of management objectives. Employees also reported that they were afraid to express criticism, out of fear for sanctions from management.

After the new Director-General had taken on her position, the change management strategy was changed to include personnel to a higher degree. A newly recruited top manager, replacing the one quoted above, emphasized the importance of listening to personnel in order to ensure that the right decisions are made.

An article was published on the SIA Intranet (17 February, 2009) and in the in-house magazine (2009/02), where a scholar talked about the benefits of resistance, saying:

*“There is a conception among authoritarian managers and consultants that criticism and resistance to change is counterproductive. That participation is the same as accepting the situation and knowing the goals. You often mix up passive obedience with commitment, and this can be fatal.”*

This in-house magazine was called the Pravda. An employee at the Information Department explained in an interview (23 October 2009) how they had been prevented from openly describing the actual situation at the agency, with widespread discontent and other issues. He described how all channels for criticism were closed;

*“Since I work with information, I have some experience from how this area was treated and from how we often, against our will, became part of the negative development of the change process. Channels to the Programme [the project in charge of implementing the reform/author’s comment] were more or less closed, there was no forum for discussion where employees could express their opinions. The articles and texts that were published on the Intranet and in personnel magazines was firmly controlled and in many cases encompassed pure lies, for example as concerned costs for IT investments. We who still fought for more openness and a better reflection of the every day situation of employees, had to take some beating and we were kept outside for example when a new Intranet was established.*

He explained that this situation had changed rapidly after 2008.

Employees experienced that they had very little response from management, when trying to approach them with feedback or criticism. An employee explained that it happened that she did not follow management directives, because these violated legislation;

*“I believe that we are not the pupils of Hitler. We should be able to think. There are guidelines coming to me that do not comply with the Constitution. Then you bring this up with the Chief Legal Expert and he approaches the management team, but finally realizes that their decision still remains. Then I have done the opposite, because you know that legally I have done the right thing, although managerial guidelines say something else.”*

A safety officer at the SIA explained in an interview (29 May 2009) that the current situation at the agency was totally unacceptable and that management did not respect legislation.

### ***The NAO case***

In the NAO case, preparations for the reform started with the parliamentary committee promising that they would “not go berserk” in the implementation of the reform. Employees were asked to contact them in case things were going wrong. The committee explained:

*“We depend on you to observe what is required in the organization. [...] Don’t let anything continue that appears to be developing in the wrong way.”*

Employee criticism against the style of leadership increased rapidly during the reform. Just like in the SIA case, a process involving personnel was established, but in reality, personnel had very little influence.

An employee attitude survey a year after the reform revealed that only 8 percent of employees felt confidence in the management team. In interviews, the Auditor-Generals explained that employees were merely “afraid” and that it always took time for people to accept changes as vast as this one.

A number of employees had been offered severance packages in return for their letter of resignation during the reform. Several of these employees were considered highly competent but critical to the way that the reform was implemented. This upset personnel. Employees also explained how some employees were subjected to bullying from management, as a sanction for their open criticism.

A number of projects were started, in order to improve employee satisfaction. A new employee attitude survey was conducted a year later. This revealed that confidence in the management team was still low, but the situation was better in departments.

The management team responded by saying that survey results only showed the opinions of a few overly critical employees. Since response rates were high in both surveys, this explanation did not hold, and the management team instead explained that survey results were natural given “the critical nature” of auditors in an agency such as the NAO. At a full day seminar, a lecturer spoke of the responsibility that employees *themselves* had, in order to improve workplace conditions. After this, there workshops were arranged, where employees were asked to reflect on what they could do to improve the workplace atmosphere at the NAO, without pointing at management or someone else. Employees expressed resignation at these workshops, since all agreed that their protests concerned the leadership of the Auditor-Generals, rather than anything else. The atmosphere between colleagues and at departments was good.

A new audit approach had been requested by the Auditor-Generals, against the protests of employees. An Auditor-General explained in an interview:

*“We have the opinion that this is the road that we have chosen. Either you are on this train, or you actually have to leave the organization, if you are not satisfied with it. We have taken a stand and there will be no more discussion as concerns whether or not we shall do this.”*

Employees argued that the new audit approach trivialized performance audit and violated the mandate of this new agency. An auditor described how he had been moved to a lower rank, and how his manager had stated that this was only because of his critical standpoint pertaining to the new

audit approach. A few years later, a parliamentary committee confirmed that the new audit approach, requested by the management team, did not comply with the intentions of the reform. Thus, Parliament supported the position of NAO personnel in this matter.

### ***The SUS case***

In the SUS case, there were vast protests against both the content and the process of the reform. Objections were made by employees on all organizational levels, as well as by unions, and it was reported repeatedly in the media.

A group of 28 Professors in Medicine together wrote an open letter to the hospital managers, where they explained that the reform merger would have devastating consequences for patient security, the quality of healthcare and efficiency. They also asked for the rationality behind the reform. The material that a consultancy had produced was not made public, despite Swedish legislation saying that it should. The letter said:

*“On the whole, the Group of Medical Professors request some kind of analysis or background material regarding the choices that have been made in the planned merger. What is the logic? 12 million of tax payers’ money have been invested in an investigation, but the material is not available for analysis!” (Letter to SUS, 20 February 2008)*

Higher managers claimed that change processes needed to proceed quickly. This was also what was communicated by the large international consultancy that was contracted.

All managers of medical clinics had been requested not to express any criticism against the reform openly, one of these managers reported. Those who did, would have to leave the organization, he explained. He chose to leave voluntarily. (Sydsvenska Dagbladet, 6 April 2009.) Several other medical doctors too described how those critical to the reform have been seen as disloyal by management and risked sanctions. A group of medical doctors quit in protest, as reported in newspapers. The Regional Director commented this in an article:

*“It is not so strange, considering the strong emotions that were connected to the Proluma Project [the reform/author’s comment].”*

He explained that resignations in protest, pertaining to the reform, had been expected, adding that this loss of personnel would not continue in the longer term, it would merely from a “cut” in the development curve.

Employees reported that they had had almost no influence at all in the reform, and that the management team had made many bad decisions because they had not listened to the objections of personnel. A higher manager at SUS explained in a TV interview, that certain decisions must be made top-down and that “Making decisions top-down facilitated the whole process.” (SVT Sydnytt, 16 December 2009).

The Director of Legal matters in the county council left the organization, as she experienced that she was forced to accept that they violated legislation.



*"There was very little respect for laws and regulations and the management did not take violations of the law on public purchases seriously. They used the legal department when it was convenient and ignored it when it was not. [...] They probably expected that I would keep quiet and comply with this, but for me it was impossible to continue." (Sjukhusläkaren, 13 December 2009)*

After the reform, there have been cases where the management at SUS admitted that the reform had negatively affected patient security, and The National Board of Health and Welfare has expressed severe criticism against this.

## DISCUSSION

In the three case studies, management tended to interpret resistance as a reaction based on emotions, rather than as a reaction based on a rational line of thought (the meaning of "rationality" can be discussed in this regard). The decision-making process included projects where personnel were involved, but still many employees considered their actual influence in these projects as very limited. Either projects did not come to represent the opinion of personnel, or management did not take into account the suggestions from these projects. Managers spoke of resistance as a natural, inevitable problem during a period of the change process, arguing that it would disappear after some time. They spoke of themselves as competent, in the SIA case a manager explained that he could see further than employees, and that employees were only expected to focus on their work at hand. In all three cases, employees described how critical employees were met with sanctions by management.

A framework distinguishing between four managerial interpretations of resistance can be adopted in order to understand observations. This has been elaborated by Bringselius (2010) and it is depicted in Figure 1. The framework includes two variables: The emotionality of resistance and the changeability of resistance. The four interpretations are: Resistance as opinion, resistance as a psychological reaction, resistance as conviction, and resistance as personality.

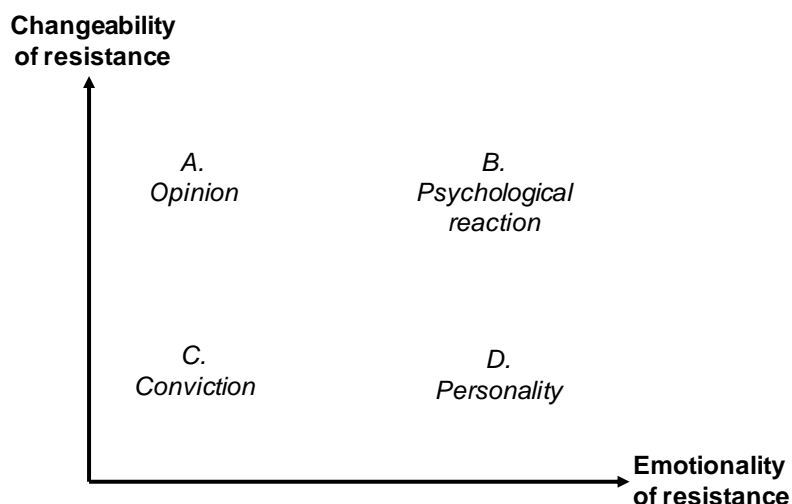


Figure 1. Four interpretations of resistance. From Bringselius (2010).

In the change management literature, resistance is commonly described in terms of anxiety, insecurity, uncertainty, fear and stress. It is commonly described as a psychological reaction, where resistance is assumed to be based on emotions, but possible to change. This interpretation is influenced by writings in social psychology. This is also an assumption behind many models where resistance is described as a temporary phase that people must pass in any change process (e.g. Craine, 2007). In all three cases reported in this paper, management talks of resistance as such a phase. In the SIA case, a higher manager refers to such a typical model, and the in-house magazine reports on how employees can “cope” with all the changes. In the NAO case and the SUS case, management explained that objections would decrease as soon as the new organization has been further established.

Interestingly, in the NAO case, management initially spoke of resistance as a psychological reaction, but when employee protests did not stop, they shifted and started talking of resistance as a personality trait (from position B to position D in Figure 1).

When resistance is understood as a matter of opinions (position A), resistance is assumed to be less emotional, and in order to improve decision quality, management is likely to be interested in a dialogue.

Objections are understood as a matters of ethics (including whistle-blowing ) or personal convictions in position C, in Figure 1. This was a common interpretation of resistance among employees. The SIA employee who explained that personnel could think themselves, they were “not the pupils of Hitler”, was one of those. She continued to conduct her work in accordance with legislation, rather than in accordance with management directives. There were several such examples also in the NAO case. In the SUS case, an example is the Director of legal matters, who resigned when she experienced that management did not respect the law.

In the reforms, employees claimed that management violated legislation, and complaints confirmed this in a number of issues in the SIA case and the SUS case. In the SIA case and the NAO case, management also chose a decision-making process that violated formal directives, as concerned employee influence. Professional autonomy was also hampered.

Observations indicate that management, in these reforms, do not adhere to the public sector ethics that has become norm in both Sweden. In a document stating shared values for the public administration in Sweden (Krus, 2009:10), it is stated that “the public administration works as a service to the citizen”. The importance of employee integrity is emphasized: “Key words for the governmental official is independence, impartiality, integrity and equal treatment.” (p.10). Lundquist (2001) argues that this integrity is a fundamental reason why people must not be degraded to simply accept any change, but it is both their right and their duty to sound the alarm in case of wrong-doing or other issues. He explains that it may be challenging to keep a sound balance between keeping citizen trust, and using the freedom of opinion.

One way of understanding this ethics is to interpret these as an expression of a new balance between property rights and human rights, as suggested by Walter (1985) for the context of mergers (regardless of sector). In a reform, management may experience a strong pressure to perform on traditional financial measures, and the change process may therefore be seen as a period when the

previous ethics temporarily must be put aside. Utilitarian values, where the aim justifies the means, replace previous psychological contracts (Bringselius, 2008).

Four decision-making strategies, corresponding to the four interpretations of resistance, have been suggested by Bringselius (2010): Dialogue and perhaps changed plans (A), therapy (B), dialogue and changed plans or exit (C) and exit (D).

When resistance is interpreted as a psychological reaction, based on emotions, the change management strategy tends to be “therapy”. Management wants to help employees cope with the planned changes, by reducing insecurity, keeping them informed, and perhaps giving them a sense of being a part of the decision-making process. Participation is, however, not the same as influence. This strategy corresponds rather well to the process as described in the three cases. Employees were invited to participate in the implementation of the reform, but they experienced that they had very little actual influence in decisions.

Interpreting personnel resistance as an emotional reaction legitimizes a position where resistance, understood as employee objections, are ignored. When resistance is interpreted as a matter of personality (position D), it even becomes (to some degree) legitimate to offer employees severance packages in return for a letter of resignation.

At the left side of Figure 1, decision-making strategies involve dialogue and personnel influence. Nutt and Backoff (1993) talk of employee influence as an important means to create motivation in the public sector, since studies show that financial rewards do not affect motivation much in this context (Lawler, 1971). Nutt och Backoff (1993:226f) explain:

*“Enthusiasm can be created when professional staff members are provided with ways to participate in the strategic management process. Participation caters to the desire of public sector employees for important tasks and roles as well as an influence over what the organization does. Private sector strategic management procedures make no allowance for such involvement.”*

It is possible to talk of a decision-making culture, or decision-making tradition, in the public sector, where a high degree of personnel influence is expected. This may be explained partly by the democratic tradition in a political level.

Several scholars have called out for a new approach to resistance, for example Hirschman (1970), Hodson (1995), Ford, Ford and d’Amelio (2008) and Bringselius (2008, 2010). A problem with the prevailing interpretation of resistance is not only that assumptions on its emotional underpinnings may be false, but also that it conflicts with a public sector ethics, and especially whistle-blowing opportunities.

The framework helps us understand the different interpretations of resistance among management and personnel in these three public sector reform. On the one hand, there is resistance as a matter of convictions, with a focus on ethics and whistle-blowing. On the other hand, there is the classical interpretation of resistance as adopted in the private sector and also in change management theory. This partly follows from a strong bias towards a management perspective in the social sciences.

## CONCLUSIONS

Some observations pertaining to managerial attitudes to resistance in public sector reforms, have been reported in this paper. The three organizations that have been studied are the National Audit Office in Sweden (NAO, also called a Supreme Audit Institution), the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (SIA), and the Southern Sweden University Hospital (SUS).

The case studies indicate that management assumes that personnel resistance, understood as objections, is based on emotions and insecurity. It thus becomes legitimate to ignore these and adopt a top-down decision-making process with very limited personnel influence. At the same time, public officials are expected to be able to adopt whistle-blowing to inform the citizen of a potential situation of mismanagement.

A framework by Bringselius (2010) has been adopted. The four interpretations of resistance in this framework illustrate the conflict that arises in public sector reform between whistle-blowing opportunities and the employer's request to keep silent about objections, or to direct these only to specific channels.

While a whistle-blowing ethics requires that objections are seen as a matter of opinions or convictions, in practice, in these reforms, the management teams have treated resistance as a phase of upset emotions that employees must go through – or as a matter of personality, making it legitimate to use sanctions against critical employees.

The situation may be understood as a result of private sector norms, being transferred to the public sector, without reflection on how these may differ (Kolthoff, 2007). It may also be seen as a result of a change management theory that generally has neglected the aspects that makes the public sector different from the private sector.

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## **Media**

Sydsvenska Dagbladet, 6 April 2009

SVT Sydnytt, 16 December 2009

Sjukhusläkaren, 13 December 2009

## **Empirical material**

Interviews and various documents from the three case studies