



Examining the role of trust and informal communication on mutual learning in government

PUBLIC AGENCIES ARE charged with developing workable policy responses to hugely complex issues, including the myriad of environmental problems humanity faces around the world. To develop cohesive and effective governance frameworks, public servants must coordinate their efforts at a number of levels, often observed and reported through various formal networks. However, the extent and relevance of informal networking in the public sector, which can take place in hallways, at the pub after work or over a cup of coffee, is under-researched. So too are the different dimensions of trust that are built through, and impact on, such interactions.

Dr Gordon M Hickey and his team at McGill University in Canada are looking into this issue. Recently, they have studied cases in the transboundary governance of Pacific salmon fisheries and the development of climate change policy in New York State – both of which require extensive formal and informal interactions between diverse government agencies that can enable knowledge sharing, collaboration and mutual learning.

THE TRANSBOUNDARY GOVERNANCE OF PACIFIC SALMON FISHERIES

The first paper, on Pacific salmon fisheries, analysed interactions between civil servants

from five jurisdictions (the federal US, federal Canada, British Columbia, the Yukon and Alaska) to gauge the nature and extent of their communication networks and also the degree of trust in these relationships. The results painted a picture of patchy interagency communication and relatively low levels of interagency trust between civil servants in the different jurisdictions, especially for the 'relational comfort' dimension of trust, – suggesting the potential for enhanced interaction through innovative and targeted public administration strategies.

To access the full paper visit:
http://bit.ly/salmonfisheries_paper

CLIMATE CHANGE POLICY IN THE STATE OF NEW YORK

In the New York study, the researchers used surveys and interviews conducted with public servants from various agencies and levels of government (local, state and federal) to examine the effect of two key network properties: formal and informal interagency communication, and the distribution of two dimensions of trust ('fair play' and 'relational comfort'). The results demonstrated that formal communication between public servants in different agencies was more popular than informal communication, and that these

interagency relationships tended to be characterised more by a sense of fair play than by relational comfort. Interestingly, however, informal communication and relational comfort were the most important factors in facilitating interagency collaboration, suggesting some important opportunities for enhancing public administration.

To access the full paper visit:
http://bit.ly/NewYork_2016paper

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Public servants reported communicating with other government agencies through formal channels more often than informal. In the New York survey, formal communication was 50 per cent greater than informal. Yet informal communication was nearly three times more effective in influencing mutual learning.



Different forms of trust matter. In the New York survey, 'fair play' – that a collaborator is fair and unbiased in their dealings – was nine times higher than 'relational comfort' – that the relationship with a collaborator has gone on long enough for it to become comfortable, well understood and equally reliant on informal and formal outcomes. Yet relational comfort was twice as likely to facilitate mutual learning.

