

Austerity's assault on the public sector has had tremendous impact on managers' physical and psychological wellbeing

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*Austerity policies have meant many job losses and organisational change in the public sector. **Les Worrall** has conducted research that examines how radical and sustained organisational change, in both the public and private sector, impacts managers' physical and psychological health. Managers in the public sector were found to have been far more adversely affected by a period of relentless change relative to those in the private sector, with very negative effects on their health, their wellbeing and on their non-working lives reported.*



Since the 2010 election, the public sector has been the focus of a sustained ideological attack with the sector being subjected to waves of destabilising change: over 631,000 public sector jobs have disappeared at a time when the demands on the sector have clearly increased. Many organisations have had to radically reorganise the way they deliver services often by outsourcing to private sector providers. Other organisations are facing the threat of being fully or partially privatised often at a pace determined by political agendas and not at a pace which would make any transition realistically manageable. It is clearly not an easy time to be working in the public sector and difficult to feel valued when you feel that the government is out to get you.

I have been conducting research on managers' experiences of organisational change since 1997 for the Chartered Management Institute on a project originally sponsored by the Post Office. The [latest survey](#) was undertaken in mid-2012 and it revealed the impact that radical and sustained organisational change had had on managers in both the public and private sectors. More specifically, the research quantified the scale and nature of change and measured the impact of change on managers' physical and psychological health, on their working hours and on measures such as organisational commitment, loyalty, morale and productivity. While managers in the private sector were found to be having a far from easy time, managers in the public were found to have been far more adversely affected by a period of relentless change since 2010.

The prime driver of change throughout the public sector was clearly cost reduction with a strong emphasis on both voluntary and compulsory redundancy underpinned by an assault on public sector workers' terms and conditions. Almost 80% of managers in the public sector reported that their organisation had experienced voluntary redundancy (30% in the private sector) while about 50% reported that their organisation had experienced compulsory redundancies (37% in the private sector). Over 90% of managers in the public sector had been involved in a major organisational restructuring but, more worryingly, many had been caught up in successive waves of restructuring over a number of years. One manager told me that he had had to apply for "his own job" four times in two years and that the job he finally accepted was on significantly worse terms and conditions. Over 60% of public sector managers reported that they had experienced a worsening of their terms and conditions as organisations sought to drive down costs (37% in the private sector). Additionally, about one in three public sector managers reported that their organisation had outsourced services to the private sector.

Given the scale of change affecting the public sector, it is not surprising that managers' sense of loyalty to their organisation, their morale, their motivation, their sense of job security and their sense of their own wellbeing had plummeted. On all these measures public sector managers scored much worse than their private sector counterparts. Over 86% of public sector managers reported lower morale (55% in the private sector); 83% reported a lower sense of job security (54% in the private sector); and 75% felt that change had resulted in their organisation losing key skills and experience (53% in the private sector). There was also clear evidence that cost-reduction driven organisational change had led to considerable work intensification and extensification in the public sector. Public sector managers reported that the pace of work, the volume of work and the pressure put upon them to work longer

hours in order to cope with more burdensome volumes of work had all increased. The effect of redundancy and delayering had been to increase role overload in the public sector. Significant proportions of public sector managers reported that working long hours was having a very negative effect on their health, their wellbeing and on their non-working lives.

More insidiously public sector managers were more likely than their private sector counterparts to report that they felt that they now had less control over the pace of work and less control over how they did their jobs as performance management regimes had become more aggressively and pervasively applied. Levels of workplace control had clearly increased.

The impact of organisational change had had a significant impact on managers' physical and psychological wellbeing in the public sector. Of the 30 measures we used to explore the health impacts of change, 28 had deteriorated since the last time we ran the survey in 2007. But, despite the oft publicised concerns about absenteeism in the public sector, managers in the sector had taken less time off work raising concerns about the problem of increased presenteeism at a time when managers' sense of job security had declined. Other measures in the survey also showed that presenteeism (i.e. going to work when you are not fit to do so) had increased markedly.

The 2012 report raised a major concern about the impact of change on managers' sense of their own effectiveness: it revealed that there had been a marked decline on many of the measures that have a direct impact on managers' ability to do their job well. For example, 35% of public sector managers reported feeling unable to cope (25% in the private sector); 68% reported constant tiredness and insomnia (56% in the private sector); 50% reported having experienced difficulty in concentrating (39% in the private sector); and 32% reported having experienced difficulty in making decisions (23% in the private sector). Almost one in five public sector managers claimed to have experienced an anxiety attack in the year prior to the survey due to work pressures. If I have to be operated on by a surgeon, I hope he/she is one that does not feel unable to cope, one that does not feel constantly tired and one that does not have difficulty in making decisions.

In addition to these changes, more junior managers had lost faith with senior management in their own organisations. While 44% of private sector managers think that senior management in their organisation is managing change well, this declined to under 30% in the public sector and showed a marked deterioration from its 2007 level. The degree of trust between more junior managers and the most senior levels of management has also been eroded. The percentage of more junior managers who think that senior management are committed to promoting employee wellbeing also declined significantly since 2007 and was much lower in the public sector (30%) than in the private sector (44%).

Since 2010, there has been a period of intense turmoil in the public sector and any reading of the runes reveals that things are going to get worse. The dominant political narrative since 2010 has been to emphasise the inefficiency and waste of the public sector and the efficiency and effectiveness of the private sector. This unsubstantiated narrative has been used to justify the continued ideological assault on the public sector. Yet, the private sector has had many conspicuous failures such as G4S at the London Olympics – not to mention a few rather large banks and train operators. We dismantle the public sector at our peril.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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