

## ***Local Development and Decentralized Management Best Practices on Control from Medium Size Municipalities in Québec (Canada)***

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**Abstract:** *In the last 15 years, municipalities in Québec became more autonomous. Their operations depend almost completely on local taxation and their citizens compare taxations levels with other cities. They operate within the legal framework imposed by the provincial government. This one includes, among others, measures on security, the buying process or the debt management.*

*We met municipalities between 25 and 80000 citizens in order to compare their approach to cost control. How did they manage their debt, their buying process and their infrastructures? We found many different practices, related to control level, services quality or municipal policies. The control issue constitutes a particular question. On the one hand, mayors and councillors want to lower taxes or no let them grow because of the people pressure so important for their re-election. On the other hand, the provincial government imposes new security or service quality control norms that make these expenses grow. That explains why most municipalities try to control their costs a strong way and try many different techniques and procedures to win that.*

*Some show centralized information systems, others not. The best ones invest in information, but had to develop procedures to maintain the data up to date. Some create groups to reduce buying costs, some exchange on their improvements, some develop systems for creating a particular economy-culture, where people do not spend even when it would be desirable for the long term. The study considers technical control procedures but also cultural development issues, where employees have a strong implication and where their knowledge and abilities are used. Some of these innovations present advantages and dangers and we try to present some of them.*

**Keywords:** *decentralised management, local development, public debt, buying process*

Constitution, in Canada, gives to provinces exclusive competency on municipal administration. In consequence each province has its own particular situation. In the last 15 years, municipalities in Quebec got more and more autonomy, with flexibility on their orientations, policies and budget control. The cities leverage taxes on the properties value and other taxes so that they find themselves mainly independent from central governments, except for the obligation to live with the provincial laws that govern them and from specific programs coming from federal and provincial levels every four or five years.

Considering these cities have actual control on their costs and their general management, we were interested in knowing how they manage to optimize their situation in relation with the following points: public debt, buying policies, material and infrastructures. What innovations can we identify in order to complete our best practices description?

The whole question of how to control is very specific. On the one hand, mayors and counsellors want to reduce taxes, or at least to avoid their growth, because they consider that it is important for their re-election, on the other hand, the provincial government issues new rules, new laws and new policies (security, environment, quality control) that have an obvious influence on their operating costs. Needless to say they have some kind of challenge here to balance their wishes and conditions.

One can imagine the simplest strategy would be to cut everything, public services and controls, replace public equipments with poor quality material or withstand normal replacement, cut on maintenance or reduce the number of employees. But there exists too the possibility of inventing new ways of managing, optimal buying with systems that permit getting the best of the market at the best price. How do they cope with this situation in order to maintain long term development and respect the financial framework they have to live with? How do they manage this situation, the methods used, the innovations they make, mainly in relation to the four sectors identified (debt, buying, material and infrastructure).

### **Methodology**

We met public managers from cities having between 25 000 and 80 000 citizens, who were in charge of the different sectors we were interested in, the number of persons changed in each case. There was always the finance director (treasurer), plus people in charge for buying, managing and maintaining public equipments, machines, structures (like buildings, pipes for clean and dirty water, roads etc). We had individual and group interviews on themes related to control, looking for practical examples and innovative experiences.

The interviews were semi structured, lasted between 30 and 90 minutes using a guide and a short questionnaire. The transcriptions were analysed using Atlas.ti software. We divided the results in four parts, debt, buying, material and infrastructures. They described policies, actual resources and tools they use to gain efficiency and effectiveness.

In relation with the debt, we talked about policy, strategy and other elements, in relation with buying, we looked at documents used, buying process, necessary information, buying policy, control strategy, relations with providers, inventories, quality evaluation and complaints. For the infrastructure we worked on documents used, inventories, prevention, material and the role of the politicians and managers.

### **Results**

Considering the decentralized system, we found significant differences between the cities. Some have centralized systems (generally the bigger ones) some not. Some talk about the cost reductions they realize, others say that the control cost is higher than what they can save. Some have sophisticated computer systems while others refuse to invest in hi-tech, saying the system costs overpass the economies. Some have their own manual system to control while others just let the material and the structures go down, changing just what is broken. Some care about the future and others about the sole expenses level.

We hence present different practices, with commentaries on their consequences, good and bad. Our interest is finding new ways to improve their management. We have to consider a political dimension related to the proximity of mayors and counsellors -although we did not meet political personal- and an administrative dimension related to the public servants perspective. It is clear, though, that both parties learn from working one with another. The fact of longing for information or refusing information is part of the learning process that constitutes in our understanding, a form of control.

## **1. Managing the public debt**

The debt issue is extremely important while its management is very simple. *You decide what you want to put on the debt and the rest is for operations.* Some cities decided to cut their debt by reducing all types of costs. They stopped investing in infrastructure, except when it openly breaks down (broken culvert, hole in the street) and that permitted clearing the public debt in a few years in one case. Some others had a plan to reduce it in a specific number of years, in order to minimize budgetary restrictions while maintaining an optimal operation capacity. The danger of reducing too fast is the risk to face big expenses after and not being able to cope with the fiscal basis, getting the obligation to go back growing the debt.

Cutting the debt means creating a culture of “no more debt” in these organisations. If very big expenses occur, it is not evident that they will have the capacity to pay directly without borrowing: the argument of those who reduce is that in the future people will have a great capacity to borrow, which is at the opposite of the managing culture they implemented. Anyway, those who will get the problems are politicians who will be elected in the future, not those who are there now. This is important because it conditions all the way the management is done now.

The ultimate consequence is that what is hidden (infrastructure), will be neglected a lot more than what is on the ground (parks and direct services).

## **2. Buying policy**

All cities have the continuous obligation to buy and they must respect the specific laws that condition their buying. They need to acquire goods or services in the right quantity, quality delay and service conditions (Le Duff, 1992; Leenders, Fearon & Nollet, 1993). In the smallest cities, the process is pretty open, people buying what is needed and referring to a general policy. The preoccupation to favour local purchase is important, although the law does not permit it. Some give local vendors a 5% advantage on small contracts, some say they should have an advantage being there so it is not worth giving them something more.

The law says that from 100 000\$ the transaction has to be public, with obligation to keep the data public (North American Free Trade Agreement). From 25000 to 100 000\$ there should be two or three offers, and under 25000 the city’s decision prevails. Apart from the legal point of view, this function turns out to have become very dynamic. In some regions buyers have meetings, managers from different cities share information on prices, products, deals, people in a same city from different administrations (education and health) do the same. They created buying centers who negotiate bargain prices on some items cities need. The government too created a buying center, available to municipalities, as did the Association of municipalities. Each city has the choice to buy through this center or directly, depending on their capacity to find better deals on their own. Bigger cities developed some clear expertise on buying, defining needs and finding the most appropriate products to satisfy their departments. They have some employees who meet salespersons, inspect products, negotiate contracts and discuss with their users inside.

### **2.1 Buying process**

These buying services generally have a five step process to buy. 1) Needs definition depending on what users asked for and discussions with buying experts. 2) Offer preparation, with specifications, including the date for product or service delivery. 3) Identification of different sources to buy from and contacts to obtain a sufficient number of sellers. 4) Offers analysis: finding the best offer and the best seller, using an experts, users and buyers committee. Sometime they do it using two steps, first evaluating providers’ quality to eliminate those who do not qualify and then evaluating the price. 5) Offering the contract to the winner with the proposed conditions.

They make a clear distinction between specialized contracts (drain, culvert or machine) where the user's expertise is fundamental and repetitive buys (paper, office articles) where standards exist and where the competition between providers is essential. If the buying system is centralized, control is better and fraud is less possible, but the system cost is higher. Smallest cities (under 25000) no had such centralized systems while bigger ones had. The centralized system provokes the buying process' bureaucratization (Beauregard & Beland, 2001). We realized too that cities with centralized systems usually justify their costs by taking a percentage (like 15%) of all what is bought to say that this is the economy they provided to the system, which is a theoretical perspective.

The best justification lies in better quality related to a fit with needs, and price reductions. They know many products, some of them unknown to the users and can make interesting suggestions. So their contribution is related to better specifications for specialized products and better prices for the others. In a municipality that does not have the centralized system, there exists a serious risk of wastefulness, fraud or underhand dealings that can go undetected for a while, what would constitute a political scandal after. But those without system say they know their people and do not want to pay for a service more expensive than the economies it can generate, and their size does not justify the expense.

## **2.2 Inventories**

This question turns out to be very important. Most municipalities maintain weak inventories, in order to reduce costs. "We try to maintain an inventory with rapid rotation, responding to the needs and emergencies". "We are close to everything and it's easy to obtain what we need, except some rarely used products like water pipes". They try to avoid big depots and the costs that accompany them. The rule is to be able to operate on a daily basis and reduce inventory costs. Some prefer to maintain these inventories close to the users, like what has been applied for years in the private sector (Christensen, 2001). Nowadays it is easy to have a just-in-time contract where the provider delivers on a constant basis, according to the needs.

## **2.3 Observations**

As said earlier, council members prefer to encourage their merchants and question a lot about transactions who do not favour them, particularly where the law is not a direct issue (under 25000\$). Among these councillors, some are not familiar with accounting or financial data, but more and more they ask questions on costs: "why did you spend that, why did you pay that price, how was this done?" In some cases they study their documents on week ends to prepare for the Monday night meetings with city managers. All spending must be approved by the immediate superior (hierarchy), each administrative level has a spending limit and there is in most cases an organizational culture that has a dominant effect on employees' behaviour. This ultimate dimension is critical because it conditions the way they will manage, ask for budgets and prepare their plans. If they estimate, after some budget rebuttal, that what they need will be refused, they stop asking for it. They just ask or prepare for what they think will be accepted at the political level. In consequence, the Council may not receive the proper information, because fundamentally it is not interested in knowing the problems and because it refuses to spend what is not obvious. Employees tend to quit their responsibilities on planning or preparing for problems because they consider politicians have no interest to be informed.

Some cities initiated associations for buying, as suggested by Leenders & Nolet (2006). For example, all cities inside one region buy chemical products together to reduce costs. Or they buy papers or general products in association with other public institutions in the area. But the limit comes from the will to buy locally, and when the transaction becomes important (over 100 000\$) they have to comply with the law and initiate a public offer process. In that sense, using public buying centers

offered by the Government or the Association of municipalities permits cutting costs without these difficulties.

One case was very innovative. One city signed a contract with a local bank to use Visa cards for all the acquisitions. Each public servant whose job includes buying receives a Visa card with a personal limit on a daily basis and a transaction basis (over that he must refer to his boss and so on). Each one signs a contract to agree that any amount not justified will be removed from his salary. The control is done monthly by each hierarchical superior and the city issues just one check per month, allowing a three persons reduction on the finance service. The buying is easier and faster for the employees and the control is easier. There is a need to negotiate in advance with general providers with that system, but in that case everybody accepted without problems.

## **2.4 Transactions**

It seems to be common to find public offers just under 25 000\$ in order to avoid public transactions conditioned by the law. The trick is to evaluate the amount of hours and ask an enterprise that knows the file if it would accept to do it for a specific amount. Many of these enterprises prefer a secure contract at lower price in order to be sure to get it. They say things like “normally we should charge 35000\$ but we will make it for 25 to be sure to get it. In these cases, municipalities prefer to do that while making a “rotation” of enterprises in order to avoid that one get all the contracts. Finally, more and more, they make public the results of the public markets (Internet or documents) in order to maintain trust for the system and to help firms prepare better in the future by knowing their weaknesses and the difference between them and those who won the contract.

## **3. Infrastructure**

This case is particular. We wanted to know, about the state of the infrastructure, what the strategic information is for them, how they plan to finance the expenses, what is the management policy for prevention and which elements condition the decisions. We observed different practices.

In many cases they decide on the budget considering just what is left after paying the debt. Some less common cases can be found where they prefer to maintain the infrastructure quality, but most cities do not. “Investments in the streets passed from 14 M\$ to 4M\$”. “We wait for the problems to occur”. “Maybe our children will get used infrastructures but they will have a good capacity to borrow”.

Provincial and federal governments offer subsidies (Infrastructure Program) that constitute additional decision factors. Some municipalities refrain from investing, speculating when the next subvention program will arrive. They constitute an incitation for investing when these programs arrive, but they constitute a restriction when people wait for the next. These programs are built around a shared expenses principle: federal government puts 1/3, provincial 1/3 and the municipality must put 1/3. Thus the cities need to have a long term plan in order to receive the money, but they prefer keeping their capacity to pay one third of a big program than spending on a regular basis and pay everything.

The public servants often complain about the fact that politicians favour what is visible. “You can find cases of new asphalt over a ruined base, although it is not desirable”. The main problem of infrastructure is that it is invisible, contrary to parks or football fields. You must react rapidly when grave problems occur, because citizens will never accept to stay without water, or with inundations, although the reaction appears only when facing a crisis.

### **3.1 Prevention**

All cities inspect their fire-hydrants, measure the thermostatic pressure, but it seems that the obligation comes from the insurance companies or from the ministry of Municipal Affairs to improve public security. Some of them make a preventive control: “using cameras for the close culverts or water pipes to detect leakage; water consumption lowered 20% in spite of a population growth”; “we found that prevention costs less than repair, we avoid supplementary hours, we have spare parts, budget stays controlled and service is better”.

Nonetheless, this does not seem to be obvious. Others claim that the prevention cost is too high to apply at infrastructure sector. They measure water quantity per neighbourhood to learn is water is lost en route. Results differ with municipalities, small ones being more critical of prevention spending.

### **3.2 Strategic information**

In a perfect world, the municipality should have a complete and permanent infrastructure quality and use inventory. But it would be too expensive to maintain effective. “The camera-scanner technique is too expensive to generalize, just to confirm a decision”; “we maintain the objective of having a computerized information system”.

It seems, according to many of them, that there is a serious risk of investing in a sophisticated system and afterwards not having enough money to keep it posted up to date. This type of system effectiveness needs using the competences of every type of employee in direct contact with the field in order to put in data on what they observe at their level. This is true particularly for workers, supervisors, directors or people with simple contracts who must acquire the technical skills to observe, evaluate and manage the input system. This change is mainly structural and there is a need for preparing long before, because it changes culture and habits. Some cities took the subsidies to give themselves an information system but few of them succeeded in maintaining it in good shape, the exceptions being those who invested too on human techniques to gather data and prepare the people to interact directly with computers.

Other systems observed were very limited, with paper plans, books or maps. “We have a book but it is so big that you cannot use it to make a diagnostic”. “It has been 15 years we walk the streets of the whole city, but the document is huge and it is not kept up to date”. “We document everything, all that makes 12 thick files”.

Some have a map with color pins to illustrate each damage or the whole situation (green is “ok”, yellow is “watch out” and red is “repair now”). You can find too some forms or card indexes with five deterioration grades (visual state) with criterias like frequency and easiness to intervene. Finally some have information but do not know how to use it or fit it into their decisions. The information in those cases is partial, incomplete and difficult to use without transformation.

### **3.3 Analysis**

Few among those cities have strategies and if they do, they are very reactive. Most of them react to problems appeared the precedent year. The most important issue is the debt reduction philosophy and once the debt is paid for, they tend to go on checking the budget in a very strict way like they did before, on a primary mode. They respond to emergencies, invest the least possible in maintenance and prevention, with a short term economic span. Investments are concentrated in visible projects so that citizens get the impression that a lot is done. The last phenomenon is the pressure to invest equally in every sector of the city. Each counsellor wants to have “his” part of the total budget and that leads to a priority problem for the whole organization. This geographical repartition may provoke new problems and cannot be solved without more appropriate information.

The best ones invest in information, being conscious that they will have problems in the future. This provokes the necessity to train supervisors on how to diagnose, evaluate and check the information, plus how to put it into a computerized system on a constant basis. The only alternative is to control by problems accumulation or by citizens complaints (the simplest way). The map systems (geographic or color pins), the card index systems using visual observations or the paper document systems all present serious flaws due to the quality problems to maintain them up to date or even consulting them. Their information is neither recent, nor available for those who need it. Managers say: "how can you convince someone to invest in something invisible that is so expensive?" "In a mayors' meeting, someone asked: how can you convince citizens that it is better to invest in pipes than the park they asked for their children?" The answer is that in the long term, this behaviour (not knowing what is going on) is extremely expensive and it is not just a question of money but of the best use of employees' knowledge and capacity. Those who succeed in doing this are very happy with the results.

The computerized inventory costs a lot and is useless without the proper preparation to keep information continuously posted. We were impressed to see cases with so much money spent for a computerized system where the data is not renewed and you know that with each passing year the information is worth less because of the actualization deficiency. These systems are a must for the future but are useful only when their maintenance is organized. We realize that there are two important issues. Developing a system is very expensive and it is worth if there is a sufficient preparation to operate the day to day data input after. This last part bears two conditions: 1. make the operators (workers and foremen) capable to put themselves their observations directly into the system and 2. train them to be able to observe correctly and formulate accordingly. Two technical abilities are needed to obtain that. One is related to observation and formulation and the other is related to computer managing, or any digitalized system permitting them to communicate every time it is needed.

This brings another general preoccupation related to the way the information system is developed. Usually, the relationship between system users (municipal employees) and system developers (generally consultants) are not easy. The first group does not always have a clear idea of his role, people do not know how to define their needs and bring up a system where they need to determine how they will operate after. If specialists take too much place, operators will lose the possibility for adjusting to what they look for. For operators, clarifying what they need is very important but difficult: they need to imagine the system existence consequences and the learning effect that it will induce. Everybody has system failure examples because of this limitation. The simple information existence will condition the subsequent managers behaviour. Maybe it is easier to ignore, not knowing permits to organize operations a simpler way while knowing may lead to a decision freedom loss.

The most interesting effect we observed appeared with the change in supervisors' behaviour. In some cases, a change in municipal accounting procedures appeared to have been an occasion to improve the systems and their links. Cost control and cost price system implementation tell people how to behave and make easier justification of what has been done. "We have cost centers and responsibility centers. Someone is in charge of each one. We found that prevention really costs less than reparations, we avoid paying overtime, we have spare parts available. Our budgets for environment maintenance are stable while we give more services. Foremen calculate their manpower costs (not in hours) and change their way of doing things. From a financial perspective it does not change very much, but user service quality improved a lot".

The same municipalities that succeeded in doing that insist on the structure necessary to gather the information. There is a strong need to train and prepare first level managers (foremen or supervisors) who are not familiar with document management, giving information, managing computers or even taking notes on what they observe. On the other hand, there exists a gratification phenomenon, because sometime the same people get frustrated from observing what is going on while nobody seems to care. One more time, this shows the necessity to find specific municipal management

software, and considering nothing as such seems to exist in the market, the necessity to develop one collectively.

If we want to be sure the citizens' money is well spent, the big answer is how we can recuperate the mines of information that employees, in contact with the field or with the problems, constitute. That way, the controls will turn learning controls, and that permits organizations like municipalities develop better through a holistic learning capacity (Proulx, 2006). Part of the learning comes from what employees have to face on a daily basis. We already showed earlier in this text how employees, when they face systematic rebuttal, get accustomed and stop presenting projects or even suggestions. "They (the council) refused so many times a critical street refection that I decided not to put it anymore into the triennial plan".

Learning can be obtained a positive or negative way. You just have to be conscious of its power and its danger when you do not manage it. Any organizational situation bears learning opportunities. We observed here that for the city's best interest, what is learned must be positive. In consequence, all cities need an infrastructure management policy. The absence of such a policy does not allow point of view exchanges between civil servants and politicians. The missing information resulting from the superficial principle or rejecting everything without knowing is really dangerous. In the USA, many people referred to this attitude naming it the New Orleans syndrome. The fact of not knowing and not preparing help sleep well for a time but does not guaranty problems will be avoided and maybe later will be too late.

#### **4. Control, culture and learning**

Many examples show that when short term economies look over valorized, this produces a phenomenon where employees underestimate the needs in order to give information conform to deciders' expectancies. When they feel their bosses too preoccupied by costs, they tend to give an image where these look reduced, although it is not necessarily the reality. On a short term span the municipality seems to gain but there results a considerable risk of loss on the long term. Politicians do not need anymore to refuse so many projects but loose contact with key data, provoking a cost increase in case of crisis. At the opposite, the fact to make public the invitation to tender results has the same effect on providers' behaviour, because they learn why they lost and what they should improve in order to win next time.

We can call this "informal auto control behaviour" as it is the fruit of what value the city authorities. Employees know or try to know what they can do or not, and it constitutes an operative conditioning. "Here people are so afraid to be seen with a new vehicle that even the police chief do not take them and send them directly to the troops". "No over-indulgence is possible here, one must give the example". Another example came from a city where a director had bought a new seat, justified by the fact he was over weighted; the same day he got it, because of four employees complaints he decided to turn it back to the store.

A central preoccupation comes from management control, which is a different control from conformity controls we are used to (Corfmat, 2000). Our first interest was with formal controls (avoid waste, squanders or frauds, as it is important to get the best for the money spent). Nonetheless, through those formal controls, we found learning situations that constitute new controls, automatics and integrated (Drucker, 1974). Organizational culture provides behaviour models in order to define how things must be done. Getting employees responsible and defining new general desirable behaviours is an integral part of the control process.

Some municipalities refuse their employees who are in charge of buying, to meet providers without previously determined necessity. They refuse too that they let the provider pay the bill when they have lunch with them: they must bring back their bill and not accept gifts. They insist on the development of an independent behaviour from their employees' part, and they obtain that through these policies.

Having a system that put limits to the amount of what can be bought by an employee generates positive behaviours. The employee's accountability is limited by the transaction's value and he learns through his supervisor's control. He tends to know what is acceptable, which are the criteria, what values the organization, only if –obviously- the external control from his boss or the upper management works properly. Without the proper managerial control, the learning can, too, be very negative. Most cities generally function with limited staff and have to use the indirect control strategies, less unpleasing, or less offensive, more oriented to institutional development.

The civil servants we met did understand clearly their city's management philosophy, when it was clear. They knew which behaviour was acceptable or desired by the management in order to have success in their professional career, to avoid being criticized. The best municipalities are those that operate considering this principle. When they develop an information system they observe their managers' behaviour modification. When these can evaluate their decisions' effect, or their behaviour's consequence, they act accordingly and adjust their unit's way of functioning. They soon realize that sophisticated information systems require their participation, because of the necessity to continuously fill data into the system. At the opposite, a lack of participation makes those very expensive systems totally useless.

### **Conclusion**

Municipalities' situation changed a lot since 20 years. They have gained more and more autonomy, responsibilities, and financial capacity. Citizens have more and more information on what goes on in other places and some cases showed that in fact people were really "voting with their feet" in order to establish themselves in better places with less taxes. Cities, like most public organizations, live with tight financial limits and a strong obligation to deliver the expected services to their population. Nowadays, all actors in the administrative system have faced the dilemmas of personal and institutional accountability, multiplication of norms, coupled with larger and larger expectancies from users and citizens. The environment presses for more fiscal responsibility, more social responsibility and that generates critics from different sources.

We thus found two general strategies in the municipalities we observed. The first one consists in maximum cost reducing, cutting expenses wherever it is possible, which conducts to a lowering of quality for what is not visible (in particular infrastructure). Taxes are kept low, citizens as taxpayers are happy and the risk is on long term, which means after the deciders' political life-span. The second is to look for inside-the-organization economies, to try to convince the population of their choices' quality, although they will never know if they can escape the disaster in spite of their prevention policies. A very important point here relies in the costs of what is hidden. Making a street anew means changing pipes, for clean water as sewers, change electrical wires, sidewalks: every one of these repairs is very expensive and if you have to make them all at the same time it can become prohibitive. Generally all agree that if you open a street for a single pipe, it is more efficient to repair all at the same time.

All municipalities show strong preoccupations for controlling their costs. Nevertheless, they do not share the same perspective in relation with the fiscal question, the debt issue or the type of service they offer. Some of them are really dynamic and active in the search for economies, better functioning or general innovations. One cannot find a perfect city that constitutes the sum of all what has been written here. Almost each one shows some innovations, thinking continuously on what to develop, acting to create a specific know-how for some of their preoccupations. The city that presented its buying system based on a credit card use seemed very dynamic. Although this technology existed for a while in the private sector with medium size enterprises, it would be very interesting to learn how it works, because the essential part of this system is not its existence but the way it is managed.

We think these experiences offer new ideas for getting better public organizations, to improve efficiency, effectiveness and reduce the operating costs at the same time the output is increased. Actually, many cities and decentralized organizations keep looking for solution at these kind of programs.

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