The Failure of Idealism: Mental Models and the Inability to Change

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ABSTRACT:

Ideals can be tools for public administrators to use in order to increase teamwork and cohesiveness while at the same time decreasing the costs of monitoring worker compliance. Ideals can also lead to pitfalls for administrators as organization members may become wedded to a static understanding of the world. By drawing on data of idealistic leaders in the African context, this inquiry points to the difficult job that administrators face in buffering between idealistic political leaders and existing organization members who already have a common understanding of the world.
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Public administrators are attracted to ideals. American public administration has been intimately involved with the generation of ideals from the New Deal, Great Society, and Reinvention. The idea that our actions could bring about a change in the lives of those in the public is powerful. Many seek employment in the public sector in order to address the current state of the world and hopefully effect change for the better (Wise, 2005). While public administration is by no means a discipline full of dreamers, administrators exist in order to solve public problems. We would like to see improvement in the lives of citizens. Ideals can be tools to facilitate collective action, yet there is a danger in being too wedded to idealism as they can hamper the perception of change. The pitfall that ideals present is when organization members are unable to adjust their actions to a dynamic environment.

Ideals are preferred end-states such as the ideal that no child would be without medical insurance. They are a sort of mental model, a target, whereby a group of people can communally understand how the world should work. Unfortunately, they can block updated understandings of how the world does work. While public administration practitioners and theorists may have a public service motive, whereby we enter into this discipline in order to serve (Wise, 2005), ideals do not always serve people well. Prior to September 11, 2001, flight controllers and civilian pilots had been instructed that terrorists seek to hijack planes as a means to create media attention; as long as one remains calm and does not resist, people will remain safe (Kettl, 2004, p.14-15). The tragic events of the day illustrate how mental models, rules of thumb that individuals use to order a complicated environment, can let us down. Ideals as ends are not bad; rather, determination to reach ideal ends at the detriment of fully understanding the ramifications of actions can blind administrators in complicated decision-making environments.
In effect, humans can create mental models, frameworks to understand a complicated world, that focus how people consider their world. We conceptualize ideals as mental models. What happens when mental models are no longer able to adequately address complicated administrative challenges? What is the result if we hold on to our ideals at the detriment of a changing understanding of what is happening?

In order to draw out the powerful impact that ideas can have on administrative action, we draw on a situation where a small organization of political leaders held onto a set of ideals over the course of twenty years. All action was framed by these mental models. Any action that fell outside of the desired effect was labeled as aberrant. The case goes far beyond our domestic context. This case considers how a group of African youth, all trained in a set of ideals as university students in France in the 1950s and 1960s, returned to their homeland of Benin in order to foment a Marxist revolution. After twenty years of state-sponsored development, the administrators of the Beninese state had completely bankrupted the country. Similar to what may occur in American public agencies, how could a set of highly intelligent, highly motivated, idealistic young people fail so badly?

This story points to several conclusions that apply to contemporary public administration. First, mental models function well when they are flexible enough to change with a dynamic environment. Second, organizations that restrict access, either through limited opportunities for new members to join or with the inability of new information to penetrate, will be unable to effectively deal with a changing environment. Third, the investment that people put into buying into ideals means that they are reticent about changing those ideals when facing contradictory information. Organizations that face an open system must be ready to continually invest in updating mental models. Ideals can be attractive tools for public administrators in order to
maximize the performance of organization members; at the same time, an over-reliance on ideals may lead organizations down a potentially destructive path.

Public administrators face a particularly difficult challenge of routinely having new political leadership, as well as new public problems, that continually reframe what particular public organizations are meant to do. Organization members make sense of their worlds and socialize new members into common mental heuristics. At the same time, political leaders many times seek to put their own mark on public agencies; in effect, to change the organizational culture. Public administrators are in the middle between existing organizational heuristics and new heuristics from the political leaders. This article closes by drawing the lessons from a case of the failure of idealism in order to consider what it means for public administrators facing the creation of a new federal agency such as the Department of Homeland Security.

1. Rules and Mental Models

In this section we consider the (1) the reason that public administrators rely on ideals, (2) develop an understanding of the relationship between mental models and the rules upon which they are built, and (3) consider how individuals construct those models over time.

Public managers use rules as a way to foster collective action within their organizations. Rules govern almost every aspect of organizational life from hiring to dismissal, the momentous to the mundane. Policies, bylaws, and directives all provide a means for individuals to coordinate behavior. Managers can remain relatively confident that workers will be completing their assigned tasks if subordinates understand that they will be monitored and non-compliance will be sanctioned. The challenge that managers face is to understand at what point an increasing investment in the creation, monitoring, and sanctioning of rules does not result in a
decrease in poor behaviors such as shirking duty. The principal-agent dilemma cannot be addressed solely by investing in formal rules.

One option that managers have in decreasing the costs of attaining the compliance of subordinates is to foster a common set of mental understandings, mental models, upon which the rules are built (Krepps, 1990; Cooper, 1998). For example, the Ford Motor Company was facing a quality-control crisis in the 1980s. Consumers who had bought Ford products, as well as the dealers who were required to service those products under warranty, were increasingly frustrated with the shoddy workmanship of the automobiles (Halberstam, 1986). Ford executives could, and did, invest in greater numbers of inspectors and monitors but at a certain point the cost of doing so outweighed the benefit of increased car sales. Executives instituted the slogan, “Quality is Job One” to reinforce the idea that Ford employees had to prioritize finishing a product well over finishing a product quickly. Of course the aim of the new campaign was partly to improve public relations, but over time Ford employees were socialized to the fact that the system of rules that governed their jobs was built on the idea that quality was of paramount concern. A similar phenomenon occurred in the federal government with the creation of the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993. The result of the legislation was for federal agencies to concentrate greater resources on documenting the outcomes of their activities rather than spending more time on following seemingly over-burdensome red tape. Concomitantly, federal employees were socialized to the fact that not only should they seek to document the outcomes of their activities but in turn, they should seek out tasks that may have easier outcome measures than those that may be difficult. Employees have been conditioned away from process-oriented measures to outcome-oriented measures (Terry, 1998; Piotrowski & Rosenbloom, 2002). Rules are not the only tools that administrators have in order to channel employees’ behavior;
inculcating organization members into a set of agency-wide values can decrease the time and effort that administrators spend on monitoring the activities of subordinates (Krepps, 1990; Cooper, 1998).

Mental models and rules interact. The definition of what one means by a rule is rather simple: a rule defines what an individual may do, what he or she must do, or what he or she is forbidden to do (Ostrom, 2005, p.140). They are the building blocks of organizational life. Rules are built upon a shared understanding of how the world works. Similar to the process of sensemaking (Weick, 1979; 1995), individuals are bombarded by cues from a complicated environment. The newspaper editorial decrying waste in government, the memo from the agency head explaining the need to cut expenses, the talk around the Thanksgiving table about the inefficiency of the Veterans Hospital all are cues that employees receive continually. Mental models, such as stereotypes and rules of thumb, are heuristics through which these cues can be filtered. The filtered information, in turn, provides the basis for the rules systems in the organization (Figure 1).

Mental models are based on how individuals experience their world (Hayek 1952; Gavetti & Levinthal, 2000; Weick, 1995; Holland, Holyoak, Nisbett, & Thagard, 1986). There are two major means of developing mental models: first, through a process of inductively sensing what is going on in the world and building up a set of understandings of cause and effect; second, one can be socialized into existing mental models that other individuals have developed over time. The process of piecing together models from experience is necessarily inductive
(Holland et al., 1986; Gavetti & Levinthal, 2000). Individuals sample their environments, use their senses to discern what actions will result in other reactions, and integrate that information into larger categories (Figure 2).

An employee may encounter a novel situation such as being transferred to a new division. She could receive a call from her supervisor asking her to complete a memo by the next day at noon. If she completes that memo on time, she may receive praise from the supervisor for being so timely. This would help solidify the idea that timeliness is rewarded with praise. Conversely, the supervisor could be surprised that the employee had even completed the memo. The result could be another cause-and-effect understanding that the supervisor’s requests for compliance do not necessarily need to be met in a timely fashion. “Models must consist of components that can be flexibly constructed and interrelated. Our most basic epistemic building block is a condition-action rule, which has the form ‘IF such-and-such, THEN so-and-so,’ where the IF part is the condition and the THEN part is the action” (Holland et al., 1986, p.14). As people slowly add to their understandings of cause and effect in their environments, categories start to build (Holland et al., 1986). As the employee has several experiences with timeliness in the office, after having dealt with various situations of having deadlines and appointments, a category labeled ‘timeliness’ builds up. The result is that any future instance where that employee faces a deadline, she can reference the previous encounters with timeliness in order to make sense of that current deadline. Categories, in turn, can be used as the building blocks of larger generic categories, as in this example, experiences with the categories of timeliness as well as
remuneration can lead to an individual developing a larger category labeled merit where certain actions lead to different measures of merit. The result of this inductive process is a matrix of nested categories of cause and effect rules; the overall matrix, the mental model, is a tool for individuals to quickly categorize disparate cues.

Mental models can also be taught through a process of socialization. Inductively creating a mental model is costly in terms of time and energy. Many times it is easier to communicate an existing understanding of cause and effect to a new member of an organization. The process of professional education, as well as work-training internships and organizational orientation programs, is a means to provide new members with a mental model that was already developed by other organization members. Organizationally, models facilitate collective action; if members of a group have a common understanding of how the world works, they face fewer costs in collectively interacting with that world. If all members of the organization have been socialized into an understanding of timeliness, it becomes more likely that supervisors will know where their subordinates are when the workday starts at nine in the morning.

Models are inductive creations based on individuals’ experiences with the environment. As the environment evolves, so do the cause and effect understandings of that world (Weick, 1995). Rules that had held true up until that point no longer provide the same level of guidance for individuals. A new supervisor may join the department, one who cares less about timeliness. Slowly workers notice that the supervisor does not seem to care if they are late in the mornings. This new information then can be used to update the current timeliness category. As social beings, individuals then communicate this new information to other organization members resulting in a continual process where models are updated at the margins.

II. Cognitive Limitations and Learning from Mistakes
In this section we consider the specific nature of ideals, how they aid in comprehension for boundedly rational individuals, and how individuals can update their understandings of the world.

Ideals can reflect a preferred state of the world, a target towards which individuals seek to put their efforts. An ideal can be a goal. Ideals can also indicate a preferred process to get to a different state.

[Figure 3 here]

These two different views of ideals, one of an end and one of process, fit into the larger logic of mental models as means to sort out complicated world administrative challenges. Ideals as ends are represented as mental models at some point in the future, at T₂. Ideals as process represent a transition function, that is, an understanding of how to change the current state of the world to a preferred future state.

Mental models are simplifications of the real world (Holland et al., 1986, p.31). The objective reality of the world is less important than the subjective reality of that world. If humans were fully rational and able to see an objective reality, then it would follow that the analyst could predict the choices that they make without understanding how they do it.

If, on the other hand, we accept the proposition that both the knowledge and computational power of the decisionmaker is severely limited, then we must distinguish between the real world and the actor’s perception of it and reasoning about it. That is to say, we must construct a theory (and test it empirically) of the processes of decision. Our theory must include not only the reasoning processes but also the processes that generate the actor’s subjective representation of the decision problem, his or her frame. (Simon, 1986, p.s210-211)
Bounded rationality models assume that individuals have cognitive limitations. There is a gap between that objective reality and how people perceive reality; the greater the gap, the greater the need for cognitive shortcuts to help individuals cope with a complicated environment (Heiner, 1983). Jones (2001) finds that while humans have the ability to sense many things all at once, as well as the ability to store a seemingly endless amount of data in long-term memory, the major limiting factor is short-term memory. Given this biological limitation, humans create frames, Denzau and North’s ‘half-baked theories’, to filter all of the information bombarding humans from their environment. The way that filters are constructed have profound effects on how individuals view their world (Tversky & Khaneman, 1986). Through the use of a categorization function individuals consciously or unconsciously decide what cues from the world will be incorporated in the existing models of the world. Except in the simplest situations, mental models do not completely replicate the state of the world. Every time there is a choice to decide what will be incorporated in the models, there is the possibility for the models to be less indicative of what is really happening.

Individuals continually evaluate their experiences in the environment with their mental models.

Rules are in competition with each other for the best description of empirical reality. Competition will favor those rules that (a) provide a description of the current situation (match), (b) have a history of past usefulness to the system (strength), (c) produce the greatest degree of completeness of description (specificity), and (d) have the greatest compatibility with other currently active information (support). (Holland et al., 1986, p.49)

There is a tendency for individuals to not update their understandings of how the world works even in the face of repeated experiences that would indicate that the mental model in use no
longer accurately explains what is going on in their world. Organization members might find it more comfortable to label the cues as aberrant and not indicative of the strength of the overall model (Denzau & North, 1994). Boundedly rational individuals will choose to satisfice (Simon, 1955), meaning that the first rule that minimally explains the reason for aberrant cues from the environment will be used (Holland et al., 1986, p.78). Individuals can decide whether to broaden the applicability of their current mental categories in order to fit seemingly aberrant information into the current model; or, they can view conflicting data simply as aberrant and decide that it has little impact upon their current model (Holland et al., 1986, p.37). Individuals, as cognitive misers, are more likely to consider experiences that do not follow the posited cause-effect rules to be aberrant rather than an indication that their existing mental models may be faulty (Holland et al., 1986, p.205-206). It takes an investment by individuals to create mental models, if done inductively, or to communicate existing models if conducted through a process of socialization. Additionally, organizations are built upon a foundational understanding of how the world works. Questioning that foundation only serves to question the organizational fit to the environment. Organizational members face many barriers to seamlessly updating their models relating to the categorization and transition functions (Figure 3).

Administrators face three potential pitfalls in over-relying on ideals: (1) individuals who believe ideals may become blinded to the meaning of aberrant cues from the environment; (2) belief in ideals can lead to labeling believers as part of the community and non-believers as outsiders, further insulating organization members from cues that conflict with the dominant mental model; and, (3) the sunk costs in creating the dominant mental models, and in turn socializing organization members into that model, can lead to an organizational inertia where people are hesitant to give up on their models given all that they have invested in their creation.
The following section, drawing on a case study of the failure of idealism, illustrates each of these three pitfalls.

III: The Failure of Idealism in Public Organizations: An African Example

Public administrators never reach an ideal end point given the limitations of human action and interaction. The New Deal, Great Society, and reinvention have all failed to a certain extent. This section looks to an example of the complete failure of mental models to draw out the lessons that public administrators could use in order to more effectively employ ideals.

Some of the most spectacular failures of idealism in the past generation have been the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The fall of the Berlin Wall symbolized the implosion of a system that failed to change as quickly as the world around it. The fact that leaders such as Erich Honecker of the German Democratic Republic or Nicolae Ceaușescu of Romania through 1989 refused to accept that revolutionary change was inevitable illustrates how mental models can serve to systematically label cues from the environment that do not fit into existing categories as aberrant. This section draws on a dramatic example of the failure of idealism, the rise and fall of Afro-Marxism in West Africa over the past two generations. The explosive failure of state-sponsored economies in Africa is particularly important given the stark reality of poverty in the region; whereas the failure of communist ideals in the Soviet Union undoubtedly created extensive social and economic discomfort, the failure of similar ideals in places such as Benin and Mali led to massive unemployment and even starvation.

The development experience in sub-Saharan Africa has been mixed in the past fifty years. African politicians, intellectuals, and citizens exuded great hope for the continent in the post-independence period. Mineral riches, the tutelage of the Western world, and perfectly
constructed state institutions pointed towards an era of prosperity. Within ten years of independence Western policymakers and scholars faced an intellectual problem, how to make sense of the failure of the African state to fulfill such promises (Huntington, 1968). Another period of hope came, ironically, with the arrival of a younger radical generation in the political arena. Trained in European universities, this generation believed that the fundamental challenge for Africans was overcoming imperial domination. In this logic the failures in governance of the previous generation were due to leaders’ reliance on imperial powers for resources and legitimacy.

Several factors led young, educated Africans to develop a set of ideals that would be used to guide the development of Afro-Marxist states. Following World War II, France and Great Britain faced great debts and crippled economies. They were no longer in the position to have extensive colonies, especially those colonies that had never proven to be profitable. Facing financial constraints, colonial governments began to give a limited number of university scholarships to enterprising African students to learn the professional skills, in medicine, law, and public administration, needed to run a country. Young Africans attended university through the 1950s and 1960s, a dramatic time for students. For those attending French universities, the dramatic defeat of elite French paratroopers at Dien Bien Phu (1954) and the beginning of the Algerian War (1954) indicated that the colonial power was vulnerable. Communist revolutions in China, Cuba, and Vietnam served to buttress the organization of the French Communist Party on university campuses. Young Africans appreciated that throughout the developing world a new generation of leaders was coming to the forefront. Tied to radical European politics, these students returned to their African homes looking to organize similar radical revolutions.
Students returned to a difficult job situation, especially in places such as Dahomey and Senegal. Both of these former colonies, having received their independence in 1960, had been net exporters of public administration expertise throughout French colonial Africa. The Dahomeans and Senegalese elites were highly literate and educated in colonial schools. With independences throughout Africa, former colonies sought to employ their own citizens rather than the foreign public administrations. The result in the case of Dahomey was a reverse migration of trained administrators who could not be absorbed into an already bloated public sector. In 1958, 12,000 Dahomeans were sent home from Cote d’Ivoire whereas in 1963 an additional 16,000 were expelled from Niger (Ronen, 1975, p.106, f1). By independence Dahomey had 18,298 civil servants (Thompson, 1963, p.196). The returning, idealistic young university graduates had a difficult time in finding public sector employment. They turned to organizing rural peasants and urban labor unions into radical organizations seeking to overturn a neo-colonial state.

Two separate organizations formed around a set of ideals. The first group was based on ideas developed by Chairman Mao Tse-Tung in China. The ideal for this group was peasant-based revolution to overthrow the oppressive bourgeoisie. Authentic revolution would only occur from the most basic level, that of the rural peasantry. The Maoist university graduates returned to their rural villages and began to create a loose matrix of locally-based peasant organizations that were connected at the national level by a coordinating committee. Each organization was run by locals; business was conducted in the local language. The ideal of a peasant-based revolution would only occur through a massive program of socialization at the local level. The Maoists valued a broad horizontal organizational structure while at the same time putting less effort into national coordination.
The second group of university graduates also believed in the ideal of a revolution against the existing bourgeoisie. This group of students, rather than being drawn to the Maoist vision of revolution, organized around the dominant Soviet model of organization where the revolution will be led by a vanguard party. Organization was to occur at the national level amongst a small group of technically-proficient intellectuals. Ethnicity did not matter; the rural masses did not matter. All of the party members were good friends who had studied together in France. While the Maoists were organizing in their villages, the Soviets were centralized in the capital city.

In the case of Dahomey, the rupture occurred when a group of young military officers overthrew the government in October 1972. Being the sixth coup in twelve years, the young officers appreciated the need to quickly develop a following if they were to be able to retain their positions. Whereas previous regimes had turned to the existing political leaders, the new junta decided to turn to the young radicals as a new power base. The Maoist radicals had been organizing at the base and had a measure of popular legitimacy. The Soviet radicals had a strong centralized organization and were eager to be the vanguard party. The military officers did not have a set of mental models regarding how to govern the country, other than the idea that previous regimes had failed and now it was up to them to govern differently. In order to do so, they invited all of the youth leaders to a summit in order to draw up the institutions that would govern the new regime.

The two student factions believed in ideals. They were not only interested in fundamentally altering the conditions of their countrymen but also in fomenting change throughout the region. In fact, both groups had similar end-state mental models of how the world should ideally work. The French government and industry would be driven from the continent; development would occur internally leading to self-sufficiency; the entire population
would educate itself; the region would be a beacon on hope and development. The issue for the
groups was not in the end-state mental model but in the transition function, how to get from point
A to point B. The snag between the factions was ultimately organizational in nature with the
Maoists tending towards decentralized change while the Soviets wanted centralization. The
young military officers simply wanted legitimacy and to be the ultimate arbiters of change.

The youth leader summit was successful to the extent that members of both factions were
able to spend several days in the same room. The Soviets initially refused to be a part of the
exchange but quickly changed when it was apparent that they were missing their opportunity to
impress the young military officers. Almost immediately afterwards, though, tensions rose. The
Maoist faction felt that they held the key to their own success- popular support- and this was
apparent in how they presented their plan to the military junta:

> It is to you to say whether this document is complete, [but we] cannot accept any arbitrary
> amputations because only you are able to judge or apply [the proposed institutional changes].
> Certainly, there may be a need to adapt, to retouch, and even to call into question, but this
decision must be taken between you and us….It is not realistic [for you] to wait for us to stop our
battle or for us to change our battle to fit your own plans….This battle is either with us or against
us. It is for you to decide. (*Daho-Express*, 22 November 1972, No. 990)

Immediately following their declaration they all departed for their villages to continue to
popularize their ideas.

The Soviets took advantage of the absence of their Maoist friends. They played on the
fact that the Maoists were arrogant to the military officers. The military officers, in turn, played
on the fact that it would be much easier to control a small group of centralized students rather
than a large heterogeneous group spread throughout the countryside. Slowly over a period of
two years the military purged the Maoists from all positions in the government while promoting those from the Soviet camp. By the end of 1975 all of the Maoists had been imprisoned, driven from the country, or pushed underground. The Maoists had been written out of the state.

IV: Pitfall One: Blocking Aberrant Cues

The first pitfall of idealism is that it can block aberrant cues from the environment. Mental models, as the ideational filters through which individuals interpret their worlds, facilitate collective action as individuals have to invest less in exchanging information. Organization and ideas have a tight bond, also, in that at some point after the creation of an organization individuals actually think less about their mental models and simply use organizations as identification (Simon 1998). A stereotype is an example of a mental model. If an individual is a member of the army or the Maoist students, members of the community can quickly divine what their preferences would be. There is no need to invest in delving into the details of how organization members view the world as that information is already rolled into the organizational identification.

All three mental models had been honed through time and were socially transmitted. The junior military officers and the youth leaders had spent at least a decade devising these models, amongst a host of others, based on their experience with the world. Socially-transmitted mental models became connected to the identity of a community: those who were in the community, by necessity, naturally subscribed to the dominant mental models. Analogous to the process of gender or racial discrimination in the work place, those who were not in the community were automatically against the mental model and had to be permanently pushed out of the community in order to restrain the threat from those opposing viewpoints.
Mental models cannot perfectly replicate the environment given the cognitive limitations of humans.

The classification of the stimuli performed by our senses will be based on a system of acquired connections which reproduce, in a partial and imperfect manner, relations existing between corresponding physical stimuli. The ‘model’ of the physical world which is thus formed will give only a very distorted reproduction of the relations existing in that world; and the classification of these events by our senses will often prove to be false, that is, give rise to expectations that will not be borne out by events (Hayek, 1952, p.145 cited in North, 2005).

They are mere approximations that must continually be updated. With the inductive process of organization members recognizing new patterns and communicating those patterns to others, there is the risk of stagnation in closed systems:

Conformity can be costly in a world of uncertainty. In the long run it produces stagnation and decay as humans confront ever new challenges in a non-ergodic world that requires innovative institutional creation because no one can know the right path to survival. Therefore, institutional diversity that allows for a range of choices is a superior survival trait (North, 2005, p.42).

The Beninese system was effective in that it had both a means of bringing new community members in as well as systematically eliminated members who did not wish to adhere to both the dominant mental models as well as the institutions. In a country with extremely limited economic opportunities, and by the late 1970s all of those opportunities subsumed into nationalized industries, the only employer of choice was the state. Once one had found employment with the state, it was important to keep that employment. Marxist regime leaders in the late 1970s began to set up organizations throughout state enterprises designed to
educate state employees as to the nature of foreign imperialism and the need to be excellent observers for any sign of others being dangerous ‘anarchic-leftists’ in the regime lingo. These attempts to educate state employees as well as the population at large were mostly unsuccessful in communicating the dominant mental model of the regime leaders. Employees had their own sophisticated mental models predicated on the cause-effect rule; namely, if one keeps one’s political views silent, it will be possible to continue to be employed indefinitely. At the same time the organizations of ‘ideological education’ in the workplace did severely restrict the communication of other interpretations of environmental stimuli to members of the community. The politicization of the workplace effectively restricted the construction of competing interpretations of what was happening in the environment.

V. Pitfall Two: Ideational Inertia

The second pitfall of idealism can be the inertia that it creates. People organize around ideas; the sunk costs that individuals put into organization mean that people are less likely to change their ways. The organization of the Beninese state hampered the ability of top political leaders to deal with rapid economic change. The Nigerian oil boom of the 1970s was swiftly followed by the bust cycle of the late 1970s and early 1980s. The Beninese economy was in the precarious position of relying upon Nigerian wealth for its vitality, so as Nigerian regimes sought to decrease the flow of manufactured and luxury goods across the Beninese border, the economy foundered. The state was bloated supporting 45,000 employees and continued to grow as new ranks of university-educated youth were automatically hired into the public employ. By 1982 now-President Kérékou began to consider changing economic and political priorities by both firing many of his formerly Soviet-faction advisors as well as considering the help of the World Bank. While Kérékou was faced with the pragmatic choices of cutting the state, he was also
locked in to his previous courses of action. The dominant mental models of the time, that all
economic and political problems emanated from imperial pressures as well as that the solution to
any unrest was to create full employment, were the raison d’être for the Marxist regime. The
1977 Constitution created institutions built upon Marxist ideology and the economy was
completely supported by the state. Kérékou was powerless to change either of the models, even
in the face of impending economic disaster, as his rule had been predicated on these models. All
of his public pronouncements, all of the state-run press, all of the state organs of ideological
education espoused these ideas. Even if the elites of southern Benin did not completely believe
in the veracity of the models, many simply toed the party line in order to secure careers in the
public sector; the entire set of formal institutions was built on these two ideas.

By 1985 the economy of Benin had rapidly deteriorated leading the regime to drastically
cut scholarships and benefits to university students. The following year the regime again cut
university benefits and also rescinded the long-standing policy of automatic employment for
university graduates. At the same time Kérékou instituted a freeze on all public-sector hiring,
drawing both university students and the youth into the streets for months of protest. The
realities of the time, though, were that the regime was rapidly facing bankruptcy. The three
state-owned banks were lenders of first- and last-resort for the regime’s projects and were
saddled with amazing debts that would never be repaid. In 1988 all of the banks went bankrupt
leading a great number of public-sector workers to lose all of their savings. To compound the
problems that the state faced, there was no money left in the treasury to pay wages. One of the
largest sources of tax receipts was on the income of those in the salaried sector, meaning that
with unpaid wages came the dire problem of no tax receipts. Early 1989 marked the nadir for the
Beninese state with Kérékou actively courting the Bretton Woods institutions- the very face of imperialism in the dominant mental model for the state- for any funds that could save his regime.

The way that individuals understand a complicated world helps determine how they decide to best set up their social interactions. In an ideal case there is a dynamic relationship between a changing environment that sends cues to individuals, a set of mental models designed to simplify those cues into larger patterns, and the institutions designed so that community members best benefit from the patterns. The case of Benin in the 1980s is not aberrant; dozens of states were caught in the boom-bust petroleum cycle, tempted by easy credit in the 1970s and hampered by repayment during the recessions of the early 1980s. Individuals in many cases were unable to change their institutions to the new economic and political realities leading to the need of external actors, namely the Bretton Woods institutions, to rapidly change their own institutions for them. Institutions are at the center of attention for explaining not only the failure of economies in the developing Southern Hemisphere, but also the failure of the World Bank to successfully create structural adjustment programs that fundamentally better weak economies (World Bank, 2001; 2002).

VI: Pitfall Three: Organizational Isolation

The final pitfall of idealism relates to institutions: in order to overcome deficiencies in mental models, for their inability to explain what is actually happening in the external environment, organization members increasingly isolate themselves. This became apparent in the Beninese case as even those selected to be in leadership roles of the state did not even have access to the decision-making process. A vignette illustrates this point. In December 1979, a government car pulled in front of the house of a local women’s leader. She was instructed to pack an overnight bag and get in the car, which she promptly refused. After several minutes of
haggling with the government official, it was decided that she could bring her own car to a mysterious meeting of government officials. That night, after a series of speeches by various government ministers, each of the two-hundred participants was handed a simple application to be filled out. They were not informed what it was for, and seeing that they were locked in the meeting hall, they all filled it out. Only after this experience was Madame X informed that she had been accepted into the Revolutionary Party of Popular Benin (PRPB). In a set of ensuing elections, where she was selected as the candidate for women from her city, she was elected to the National Revolutionary Assembly. Within the PRPB she was elected the 3rd Vice President and a member of the Permanent Committee of the party, one of nine people selected to run the single party in the revolutionary state. Given that the 1st Vice President was terminally ill in Cuba and the 2nd Vice President made frequent trips abroad, Madame X had several times when she was the de jure leader of the Beninese state. Ironically, having ascended to the top of power, in effect being the third in command of Revolutionary Benin, Madame X admitted that she had very little understanding or effect on what the Beninese regime was doing.

The failure of ideals in Benin was morbidly fantastic. By 1985 the regime cut university scholarships sending a new generation of students into the streets in protest. By 1987 the regime cut the benefits to school teachers leading to the closure of the public schools the following year. Parents had to care for their children who no longer were in school. By 1988 the three state-owned banks, in which state employees put their savings, went bankrupt. This situation was juxtaposed against reports in European newspapers that the regime was in negotiation with international firms to accept the importation of toxic waste, some of it nuclear, for the low price of $2.50 a ton. State workers no longer went to their offices in 1989 given that they had up to six months in salary arrears. The state was no longer able to impose an income tax on the salaried
workers, making the fiscal crisis even worse. By the end of that year the regime was forced to admit failure, approve a general amnesty for all political exiles, and welcome in a new era of multiparty democracy. The idealism of the former university students led an entire state to complete fiscal and moral bankruptcy.

VII: Conclusion and Future Directions

Public administrators are idealistic, whether that means idealistic about changing the world or changing the way that their organization does business. An entire generation was drawn to the idealism of President Kennedy invoking their sense of public service culture: “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country” (Wise 2005, p.342). Idealism is an exciting and important aspect of public administration. Ideals can be tools for administrators to focus the efforts of their subordinates, reduce the costs of monitoring actions, and improve the image of the organization as a whole.

At the same time, ideals can also be dangerous for an organization, especially when their use as filters comes into conflict with a dynamic environment. If one considers ideals to be cognitive resource-saving mental models, sets of categories into which individuals can put cues from their environment, the pitfall comes from individuals blindly associating cues that do not fit into the existing set of categories to be aberrant. If one believes too much in a set of models, as did the young African university students of the 1950s and 1960s, it is unlikely that those aberrant cues will ever be formulated into a new category (Denzau & North, 1994).

A second pitfall of idealism is the fact that individuals organize around ideas. They obtain a sense of identity by being part of an organization with a set of ideals. The costs of collective action are less when people have a common means of making sense of a complicated environment. Mental models, as the ideational filters through which individuals interpret their
worlds, facilitate collective action as individuals have to invest less in exchanging information. Organization and ideas have a tight bond, also, in that at some point after the creation of an organization individuals actually think less about their mental models and simply use organizations as identification (Simon, 1998; 2000). If an individual is a member of the army or the Maoist students, members of the community can quickly divine what their preferences would be. There is no need to invest in delving into the details of how organization members view the world as all of the information is already rolled into the organizational identification.

Lastly, people invest resources in both creating ideals and the organization around those ideals. The process of building up a set of organizational mental models, or being socialized into existing ones, involves the cost associated with inductively constructing them. Individuals do not want to have to invest anew if there is no apparent benefit to doing so. The particularly damaging aspect of ideals is that the aberrant cues that may indicate a problem with existing models are filtered out. As in the case of the collapse of the Beninese state, one faced exile from the country if he or she was not willing to go along with the program.

The unique nature of public organizations, being led by political leaders tied to the electoral process, means that public sector workers often times face having a new set of mental models each new electoral cycle. The National Performance Review and the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 have pushed public administrators to construct or reconstruct the current heuristics at play in the organization to fit the new vision of political leaders. The particular challenge is the fact that while political leaders such as President Clinton and Vice President Gore may have wanted to create a new way of viewing the administrative world, public administrators must find a middle-road between the mental model that currently exists and the new vision for the future. The three pitfalls, relating to ideational and
organizational inertia, mean that public managers are in the difficult position of being the buffer between political and organizational mental models.

A particularly interesting case of such challenges has been the creation of the Department of Homeland Security in a post-9/11 world. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 drastically re-oriented the priorities of American citizens and their political leaders. Members of the various public agencies that would eventually comprise the Department of Homeland Security all had very different mental models into which they had been socialized. In less than two years the public managers of these organizations faced the large task of re-orienting their employees, to say nothing of the managers themselves, to two new charges: first, address a seemingly new issue of international terrorism occurring domestically; and second, do so by coordinating with new members of a newly-created public organization. A future direction for this study of mental models is to consider how federal managers have faced the three pitfalls associated with ideals. How does one allow organizations to open up to new members and experiences while keeping in tact a core understanding of what that organization does? The answer to this fundamental question could provide clues as to whether a new Department of Homeland Security can adequately address the challenges of a post-9/11 world.

Endnotes:

1 Unless otherwise noted, the data presented in this case study was based on personal interviews and archival documents in West Africa and the Center for the Study of Black Africa in Bordeaux, France.

2 Given the sometimes dangerous nature of Beninese politics, all participants were given pseudonyms.
References


Figure 1: Interplay of Environment and Institutions:

Environmental Cues sensed by Individual → Filter of Mental Models → Understanding of institutions needed for Individuals to benefit from interaction with the environment
Figure 2: Cues, Categories, and Institutions

Cues Sensed by the Individual

Cat. A

Cat. B

Cat. C

Institutions
Figure Three: Models as Approximations of Reality

State of the World at $T_1$ → Actual Transition Function → State of the World at $T_2$

Mental Model of the World at $T_1$ → Categorization Function → Mental Model of the World at $T_2$

Mental Model of the World at $T_1$ → Model Transition Function → Mental Model of the World at $T_2$

Source: Holand et al. 1986: 33