Commentary

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Frameworks, Practices, Mentors, Norms: What Shapes Public Managers?

Shortly after I began managing federal initiatives, a highly respected senior executive pulled me aside to offer sage advice. “There are two kinds of federal managers: task managers and people managers.” He warned against becoming a people manager and thereby taking the less valued path and undermining a promising government career. My experience has consistently shown that good managers attend to both tasks and people, a lesson also borne out by organizational leadership research. No tasks can be done without people, and unhappy people will never excel at any task. Given concerns about the chronic estrangement of citizens from government, the implications of administrative frameworks and mentorship for the roles of public managers and their participation in democratic governance also warrant attention.

It seems self-evident that the capacity of public managers to build bridges between agencies and citizens flows directly from an understanding of their roles, which largely depends on guidance from one generation of managers to the next. Can public managers act as effective bridge builders between citizens and government when they are urged to discount the importance of linking people and tasks in their own...
agencies? Can they embrace the messy work of “unorganized interests and average citizens” when they are rewarded for well-ordered expert action? Where does iterative deliberation find space in a culture that prizes efficient results?

In their article “Repositioning American Public Administration? Citizen Estrangement, Administrative Reform, and the Disarticulated State,” Robert F. Durant and Susannah Bruns Ali present a century of theoretical frameworks that mainly portray government as a mechanistic system that public managers run as implementers, much like train conductors who check tickets but otherwise remain agnostic to the inner workings of the machine hurtling through space and to its final destination. Absent is a strong sense of public managers as active stewards of socially constructed, continually evolving institutional arrangements that derive legitimacy and ongoing relevance in part from the fact that people inhabit and cultivate those spaces together, ticket takers and passengers alike.

The theory of agency, although presented as controversial, may come closest to admitting that public managers matter as innovators, not only implementers. The ongoing capacity of government relies on their institutional knowledge, networks for governing, ability to manage across administrations, and experience in supporting newly elected or appointed officials. Acknowledging distinct differences in democratic accountability between civil and elected public servants should not preclude a serious inquiry into the role of public managers in governmental continuity, responsiveness, and reform.

Aspirations of democratic governance imply more than procedural engagement between public managers and citizens, but this runs counter to the prevailing ideal of a public manager as a neutral technical expert, “on tap” to implement administrative reforms or policy goals at the behest of elected and appointed officials. Ironically, this ideal roughly equates managers with cogs in a wheel; this can create a kind of alienation from the active work of governing that parallels citizen estrangement. Managers may be thought immune to alienation because they hold authority, but the two are not mutually exclusive. In addition, professional development that chiefly rewards technical expertise encourages managers to interpret all problems as technical, devoid of social or political complexity (see the authors’ discussion of Sheldon Wolin), and this widens the divide to be bridged.

There is some basis for arguing that prevalent ideals and modes of professional development leave the capacity of public managers underdeveloped outside a narrow technical realm and may contribute to patterns of estrangement, despite many efforts to promote engagement. However, these contributions are likely not unique. Stivers (2008) and Thompson (2010) argue that the ethical norms that emerged during the past century— concurrent with the evolution of public administration as a field—favor social ideals and practices that align with scientific rationality, individualism, reductionism, specialization, and efficiency. These prevailing norms tear at a natural sense of connectedness, undermine collective forms of governance, and foster alienation.

This is precisely the notion of what Durant and Ali call “pentimento,” where old ways of thinking infuse new practices and produce no real change. When widespread civic entrepreneurship to address democratic deficits in government (see Warren 2009) leaves estrangement little improved or worse, as the authors claim, established norms may simply be profoundly at odds with those new practices. The same tension seems to apply to wicked and sustainability governance problems for which interdisciplinarity and engagement are also prescribed (Batie 2008; Graffy 2012). Citizen trust and administrative legitimacy may need to be fundamentally damaged before opportunities for extensive, innovative, and meaningful collaboration emerge (see Moynihan 2003).

Recalibrating underlying social norms in order to reform administrative practice may seem overwhelming, but reconsidering the role of public managers through this lens could illuminate dogmatic ideas that are incompatible with the increasing demands on public managers to act as ongoing stewards of human-centered social institutions in which real people participate in the adaptive work of governing social, political, and technical complexity together. How administrative frameworks align with that reality and support practical applications of democratic governance within an environment of conflicting ethical demands remains an open challenge.

References