The Role of Role Clarity Remains Unclear

The Importance of Role Clarification in Workgroups: Effects on Perceived Role Clarity, Work Satisfaction, and Turnover Rates” by Shahidul Hassan addresses a fundamental question of public administration: does role clarification “affect perceived role clarity, work satisfaction, and turnover rates in distinct offices or workgroups in a government agency”? In doing so, this article provides “a set of testable hypotheses about how greater role clarification may be associated with increased work...
satisfaction and decreased turnover rates by improving perceived role clarity in workgroups.” Although I found this article to be thought provoking and insightful, it understates the critical importance of the intersection between public administration theory and practice. As the theory of role clarity and its place in public administration evolves at a high level, public administrators are faced with the real-time day-to-day management of the government. At all levels of government, a certain degree of role ambiguity is inherent in facing this management challenge.

Based on my experience in the legislative and executive branches of the federal government, I have found that leading and managing a public agency is challenging even under the best circumstances. In today’s age of constrained budgets and profound citizen distrust, it has become even more challenging. Today’s federal employees are likely to find themselves in a range of roles from backfilling for employees who have retired to stepping into uncharted leadership positions. Federal managers must balance competing administrative interests while efficiently and effectively managing day-to-day agency operations. Similar issues can be found at the state and local levels. This operationally uncertain environment calls for managerial flexibility and strategic human capital management as a powerful tool for public managers in their pursuit of mission accomplishment.

I had the privilege to serve as deputy director and acting director of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) at a time when the strategic management of human capital was the first of five critical management initiatives identified by the administration as part of a comprehensive management agenda. The OPM was charged with overseeing this initiative and working with agencies to improve the management of the federal government’s most important asset—its people. The initiative sought to hold executive branch agencies accountable by scoring agencies’ progress on a balanced range of components. As a result, the Human Capital Assessment and Accountability Framework (HCAAF) established standards and metrics in (1) strategic alignment, (2) leadership and knowledge management, (3) results-oriented performance culture, (4) talent management, and (5) accountability to achieve a world-class government workforce.

The HCAAF merged these five distinct human capital systems into one interrelated framework to create “a consistent, comprehensive representation of human capital management for the Federal Government.” These plans were to be fully integrated with the agencies’ overall strategic plans and annual performance goals. The OPM monitored outcomes through agencies’ annual accountability reports and provided guidance, tools, and technical assistance to enable agencies to better meet HCAAF standards. Much has been accomplished through these efforts, but much remains to be done.

Along with having a strong framework in place, effectively managing human capital requires a workforce consisting of the right people with the right skills, abilities, and motivation to do the right job at the right time. Role clarity is certainly one useful tool, but we should keep in mind—as Hassan acknowledges—that it is only one of many motivators driving a high-performing workforce. Challenging and meaningful work, recognition for a job well done, reasonable pay and benefits, and work–life balance are also important.

As president and chief executive officer of the National Academy of Public Administration, I lead an organization of fellows and staff committed to improving the management and leadership of government at all levels and increasing citizen engagement. The Academy’s work has advanced these efforts to ensure that performance data and analytics in the public sector become drivers of decision making inside government agencies, not just requirements imposed by elected officials. Increasingly, a critical role of public administrators is to collect and analyze data on government performance—and to make programmatic decisions based on this data. As James Q. Wilson put it in Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It (1989), “the greatest executives infuse their organizations with value and convince others that this value is not merely useful to the bureau but essential to the polity.”

Hassan’s statistical analysis indicates that role clarity increases work satisfaction and decreases turnover. I doubt this correlation will surprise most readers of Public Administration Review. But the correlation raises other causal questions: How exactly do you increase role clarity in twenty-first-century public agencies? Is role clarity more difficult to achieve in some functions than others, in certain types of agencies, or at certain levels of government? At what level of the organization is role clarity likely to have the greatest impact? How can we balance role clarity with the flexibility required to be successful in day-to-day management? I believe that practitioners would benefit from additional research to answer these questions.

Role clarity is important, but it may not be an optimal public management strategy in certain contexts, especially for those in senior executive government jobs. Public servants should be given clear roles when possible. At the same time, they should be given enough flexibility to adjust to an environment of operational uncertainty. By learning how to skillfully navigate this uncertainty, public servants will have an opportunity to maintain their job satisfaction while delivering the highest-quality service to their fellow citizens.