

Small Scale Statesmen:

A Normative Conception of the Role and Functions  
of Public Management in Contemporary American Government

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## I. The Functions of Public Managers

Public managers -- like managers generally -- are responsible for three broad functions:

- Setting purposes consistent with the requirements and possibilities of their current situation;
- Marshalling resources -- in the form of money, legitimate authority, and political support -- to use in accomplishing these purposes; and
- Organizing and deploying available resources to accomplish the goals reliably at low cost.

Success as a public manager means bringing these things -- purpose, support, and productive capacity -- into alignment, thereby assuring the successful accomplishment of broadly supported purposes.

These words are, of course, quite abstract -- so abstract that one might think that any words would do equally well (or equally badly) in describing areas of managerial concern and action. But acceptance of this characterization has important implications for our orientation to both the context and content of public managers' jobs. The implications are easiest to see by contrasting the image of public managers presented here with more traditional concepts of public administration.

## II. Public Administration v. Public Management

In traditional conceptions of "public administration," the fundamental responsibility of public managers was to develop

efficient, programmatic means for accomplishing well defined policy goals. In addition, great emphasis was placed on maintaining strict accountability for the proper use of the financial resources and legal powers granted to the agency. Typically, accountability meant that available resources were used according to previously announced policies rather than that some mandated goal had been accomplished. As a result, the central techniques of public administration tended to be the design and use of management systems (such as budgeting, accounting, and personnel) designed to assure both strict accountability and the efficient accomplishment of mandated purposes. What "public administrators" brought to their jobs was a claim of politically neutral competence. Conspicuously absent was any notion of responsibility for setting goals, or for operating within political environments to shape the mandate that gave direction to their administrative activities.

In contrast, our conception of "public management" adds responsibility for goal setting and political management to the traditional responsibilities of public administration. Of course, we do not propose that public managers should think of themselves as monopolizing the goal setting activities, or being very powerful in shaping mandates. We understand that they share the responsibility for setting goals with many other actors in the political arena. Indeed, it is precisely this fact that focuses our attention on external political management as well as internal administration. But

we think that it is both inevitable and desirable that public managers should assume responsibility for defining the purposes they seek to achieve, and therefore to participate in the political dialogue about their purposes and methods. It is inevitable because the political environment will always be dependent on the managers for providing information about the technical and administrative feasibility of proposed programs, for "operationalizing" broad goals established by legislatures, and for giving feedback on what has been accomplished -- whether intended or not. It is desirable because, to insure efficiency and effectiveness, public managers should develop knowledge about and feel responsible for achieving ultimate objectives which would justify the use of public authority and resources. Thus, public managers should be looking out towards ultimate objectives, and up to their political authorizing environments, as well as down and in to administrative means.

To the extent that public managers assume some degree of responsibility for articulating goals, they inevitably find themselves involved in the politics surrounding their areas of responsibility. The reason is that policy advocates who oversee their operations (or influence those who do) will always seek to buttress their preferred policy positions by asking public officials to lend the weight of their knowledge and expertise to the advocate's preferred position. But even if the public managements' role in setting goals did not propel them towards managing the political environment, then their

interests in efficient administration and institutional development would. The reason is that the powers of the political environment to review and intervene in the internal administrative arrangements of public sector organizations are so broad and so potentially damaging to the coherence of agency operations that any public manager feeling responsibility to his institution would seek "credibility" within his authorizing environment simply to ward off capricious interventions. Thus, even a public manager whose primary interest was in institutional development and stewardship rather than substantive goal setting would find it valuable to build support with political executives, legislative overseers, the press and interest groups -- in short, to engage in political as well as administrative management.

### III. Institutional Implications

So, our conception of public management adds some quintessentially executive functions such as setting purpose, maintaining credibility with overseers, marshalling authority and resources, and positioning one's organization in a given political environment as central components of a public manager's job. This shift in focus -- from management as the tidy execution of well defined policies to management as conceiving and implementing public policies that realize the potential of a given political and institutional setting -- raises an important normative issue: whether this broadened conception of public management is consistent with the desire to preserve democratic control of bureaucratic institutions.

After all, the principal virtue of the traditional notion of public administration was that it made public officials respond to policy direction from the political apparatus rather than take the initiative themselves. To now restore some of the initiative in politics and goal setting to "public managers" is to strengthen them relative to the political authorizing apparatus, and to increase the risk of government by bureaucratic mandarins.

While we recognize the institutional risks of broadening our conception of public management in the way that we have, we would defend this extension with the following observations. First, we think that public officials have always had an influential role in setting goals and shaping political consensus. Because this role was covert and disguised as politically neutral competence, however, it was impossible to see how the influence was being exerted, and to develop some normative principles to channel it. We think the actual influence could be managed more effectively if it were explicitly recognized as within the responsibilities of the role.

Second, as the scope of modern government has broadened, and the technology of the society has advanced, the relative importance of technical knowledge in shaping the government's purposes and programs has increased. This means that it is both more inevitable and more appropriate that knowledgeable officials should assume a larger role in shaping political conceptions of feasible and desirable programs. In short, if we were now designing an institutional structure to

respond to the substantive challenges of modern government rather than simply observing an evolution, we might reasonably choose to grant knowledgeable officials a broader role than we have in the past.

Third, the political challenges of managing modern government have grown as rapidly as the substantive challenges. Indeed, the two phenomena are closely related. The expansion of the government's agenda is accompanied by intense political conflict over government's proper role. As government accepts responsibility for managing the economy, for promoting racial equality, for cleaning the air and water, the politics surrounding governmented programs become both more volatile and more essential, for the ultimate success of the programs. Officials charged with accomplishing purposes mandated by legislatures, political executives, and courts find they lack sufficient institutionalized authority and acceptance of their purposes by affected parties to achieve their purposes. The only solution to their administrative problem -- that is, the problem of actually accomplishing mandated goals through the activities of largely independent organizations -- is to engage in politics -- that is, to help build a consensus for their purposes. This is difficult when the right of government to be involved at all is being contested.

Another part of the current political problems of public officials is caused by the dissolution of some traditional loci of centralized power. The balkanization of power in the Congress caused by the repudiation of the seniority system and the growth of

congressional staff has created enormous volatility in the political environments of public officials. Similarly, the frequent intervention by courts has cast doubt on the coherence, durability and appropriateness of the mandates under which the officials have been operating. Finally, the recent election of political executives who lacked close ties either to powerful political parties or whatever central power continued to exist in legislatures added further uncertainty to the power and sustainability of any given policy mandate. In short, public officials now find they have many different "bosses" asking them to do conflicting things with none having an obvious priority. As a result, the mandate for which public officials are responsible is more ambiguous and less powerful than in the past.

This is a problem, for if the mandate governing the activities of public officials is ambiguous, there is room for mischief, inefficiency, and irresponsibility on the part of public managers. Public officials with their own agendas can "forum-shop:" that is, they can assume that the particular piece of their authorizing environment that offers the strongest support for their cause is the piece that should be honored, and that all the others can be safely ignored. Alternatively, public officials may try to respond to new political demands by tearing up existing administrative arrangements designed to achieve an old goal, only to find that a year later a new political body becomes powerful and insistent in demanding that the old capabilities be restored. Or, public officials may simply refuse



to move until the purposes and objectives are clarified and use the political struggle over their programs as an excuse for inactivity. Compared with these problems, the risks of encouraging public officials to play a role in shaping a consensus about their purposes may be quite small and the benefits overwhelming, particularly because the public official may be in a unique position to develop the political compromise that would give shape and durability to their mandates.

In sum, we think that it might be in the interests of not only more effective, but also more responsive and accountable government to acknowledge and tolerate a somewhat broader role for public officials in shaping the mandate under which they operate -- i.e., in setting goals and building a political consensus in support of those goals. While much of our confidence in making this assertion is based on the diagnosis presented above, we also recognize that the balance of institutional risks and benefits depends a great deal on exactly who it is that is being encouraged to take on larger roles. In our conception we include many different sorts of officials. Central to our conception, of course, are the career civil servants who manage programs. Equally important are the political executives who share responsibility for programs with the Senior civil servants. Somewhat less central, but still included are the legislative overseers, their staffs and perhaps even the interest groups and reporters who take a special interest in a given policy area. In effect, our idea is not

so much to expand the powers of civil servants as it is to improve the conversation among the "issue networks" of officials who effectively manage policy and programs across institutions but within specific areas of governmental activity. Our idea about how to do that is not to compartmentalize the different roles and thereby exacerbate current struggles, but instead to encourage each different group to take a little responsibility for all of the managerial functions represented institutionally by the group as a whole.

The balance of risks and benefits to the cause of effective democratic governance also depends crucially on how these diverse officials exercise their new responsibilities. That turns on matters of techniques as well as orientation. For if the broadened role of these officials is accepted, they must develop new professional skills to operate successfully within these new jobs. It is to these matters of technique and skill that we next turn.

#### IV. Setting Goals and Objectives

In traditional conceptions of public administration, setting goals and designing policy were beyond the scope of the job. Such activities were the perogatives of legislators and political executives -- not public administrators. Yet, it was precisely this activity that became the focus of public policy programs. Indeed, the central aim of public policy programs was to enhance the government's capacity to design policies.

To do so, public policy programs brought a great deal of

elaborate social science apparatus to bear on the problem. Economic theory was invoked to define proper roles for government, to offer a basis for valuing public sector activities, to remind us that the structure of all problem solving situations was constrained maximization, and to help us make predictions about how the world would react -- usually in offsetting ways -- to particular policy interventions. Statistical theory was presented to introduce the ideas of uncertainty and probability, to teach efficient ways of gathering information about current conditions in the world, to explain the rules of inference in analyzing past experience, and to show how one could structure future experience to learn quickly about which programs worked and which didn't. Decision theory and operations research were utilized to show that analysts could not only describe the behavior of complicated systems such as a local economy, a transportation network or the processing of cases in a criminal court with the use of simple analytic models, but, in addition, that one could figure out which manipulations of the system would optimize its performance with respect to one or another objective.

While the weight of this material, and its close ties to disciplines with their own internal logic sometimes made it hard to remember, the reason for teaching all this in the context of public policy programs was to provide analytic tools that would allow conscientious public officials come to grips with the substance of the problems they faced. The aim was to allow analysts in the government

to structure choices -- to be able to represent in as responsible a way as possible what exactly was at stake in choosing one policy rather than another, to be able to defend one choice as preferable to another given some stated objective, and to help government policy makers decide matters of policy in ways that accomodated current levels of uncertainty about what would happen and allowed the government to learn more as it went along.

It is important to see that the use of social science methods for structuring choices about policies went well beyond the sorts of substantive expertise that had previously been expected of public officials. Traditionally, officials were expected to be experts in their particular areas, but their expertise was rooted in professional experience and knowledge. The engineers and schedulers of sanitation departments, for example, were expected to know the best way to pick up the garbage primarily by virtue of their long experience. Similar expectations governed teachers, highway designers, police managers, and so on. What the public policy programs added to this idea of substantive expertise, however, was much more rigorous devices for testing the experience-based knowledge of the traditional public officials. They asked for evidence showing that the traditional methods were successful, and for pieces of reasoning that defended the current methods of the profession against a host of imaginable alternatives. The methods they used were abstract and not specialized to any particular substantive issue. And their skepticism was without

bounds. Aided by continuing demands for public sector accountability, by a climate of innovation, and by a certain awe of the methods, those who knew these new methods of analysis found institutional footholds in Offices of Planning and Evaluation, and in consulting firms that were hired by the government to give information and advice on matters that seemed too difficult for them to handle.

Inevitably, given the heritage of the Kennedy School, we have incorporated analytic approaches to the substance of public sector problems in our conception of public management. Initially, we made a distinction between analysts and managers. Our aim for those who wished to become analysts was to equip them to produce powerful, technically responsible pieces of policy analysis. The route was rigorous training in the methods, interspered with opportunities to apply them. Our aim for those who wished to manage was more modest. We sought to make them intelligent consumers of policy analysis -- able to discover the strengths and limitations of any given piece of analysis. For this purpose, too, the route was rigorous training in the methods. But as we have thought more about public management, our ideas about what managers should know about policy analysis, and our conceptions of the sort of policy analysis that could be useful to policy makers and managers have changed.

In our current conception, public managers and policy makers must assume responsibility for the substantive goals they are pursuing, and must be able to use both the knowledge and experience of the

professionals who work for them, and the more abstract methods of the methodologically sophisticated policy analyst. Moreover, in fulfilling their responsibility, it is not enough that they can "defend themselves" against pieces of policy analysis and program evaluations, they must become aggressive consumers of them. They must be able to spot opportunities to use policy analysis, and to know how to give understandable assignments to the policy analysts and consultants who work for them. To do this well, their commitment to substantive policy analysis must be deeper and more knowledgeable than it would be in the more defensive mode. And if that sounds unreasonable, think about whether a modern day chief executive officer of a company could get along without knowing the rudiments of financial analysis and modern methods of market research. Policy analysis is what brings a public manager into touch with the environment which he is trying to improve. In fulfilling their responsibility for setting goals, then, public managers must be able to make creative use of policy analysis just as corporate strategists must be able to make use of financial analysis, marketing research, and competitive analysis.

This is far from an easy task, for the current relationship between policy makers and social scientists operating as policy analysts is an edgy one. The current loyalty of policy analysts is to say what is right and true -- without regard for what is politically authorizable and administratively feasible. A fundamental loyalty of

a public executive on the other hand is to accomplish a substantive purpose -- and that means having a substantive purpose that is politically authorizable and administratively feasible. Moreover, the current language of policy analysts is foreign to the language of policy makers and public executives. Policy makers and public executives tend to describe purposes in lofty phrases capturing broad aspirations: policy analysts rely on jargon that is more easily quantifiable. Policy-makers and executives keep things simple by mentioning only a few purposes and ignoring the trade-offs among them: policy analysts complicate matters by setting out "objective functions" that include many different objectives and specify the rates at which gains in one objective would be traded for losses on another in pursuit of a precision that was unnatural and unsustainable in political dialogue.

If public sector executives are to shoulder some of the policy analyst's commitment to being knowledgeable and articulate about what is at stake in policy choices, and if they are to use policy analysts well, then they must be able to shape the policy analyst's activities. They must connect the political rhetoric that captures and nourishes public aspirations and beliefs with narrower, concrete objectives that can guide organizational activity and accomplishment. Moreover, in developing alternative policies, they must be guided by a sense of what is within the current distribution of possibilities given the current situation. This doesn't mean they are restricted to the

central tendency or the most likely governmental policy. They can explore options at the edges, or even slightly beyond the edges of current possibilities. But it is simply foolish for them (except as politicians making their own effort to shape conventional wisdom in a given area) to propose policy options which have no chance of adoption.

So, the tasks of goal setting and policy design for public managers become synthesizing the policy analysts' concerns for substance, precision, and verifiability with the politician's needs for convincing rhetoric, and the administrator's limited capacities to build operational capacities adequate to the tasks that both analysts and politicians will on him. This does not mean that the public manager must bow to the inevitable, because no particular thing is ever inevitable. There is always some leeway -- some range of uncertainty and potential that can go in many different directions. But it does mean that a manager's calculations about ends and means must be informed by judgements about how much practical potential for action exists as well as by what is substantively at stake. And this, too, imposes professional burdens that were not part of the public manager's job when we thought of him as a mere administrator.

#### V. Shaping Mandates

Perhaps the most controversial implication of the way we have described the job of a public manager is that we have put him in the business of "politics" as well as in the business of utilizing public



authority and resources to accomplish mandated purposes. This comes as an inevitable result of thinking of the public manager as someone who has some discretionary responsibility for setting objectives, and an inevitable role in the political process as an expert whose views on the substance and administrative aspects of given decisions will be given weight by legislatures and political executives as they consider policy options. These roles, in turn, derive from the vast expansion in the scope and complexity of the government's tasks, which inevitably forces consequential decisions to lower levels of administrative responsibility.

Whatever the sources, cases describing what public managers do and how they think of their problems clearly indicate that they are intensely involved in negotiations with political and legal institutions that give them their mandate. They spend great amounts of scarce time checking, sustaining, mobilizing, re-defining, narrowing, and generally giving shape and power to the mandate under which they operate. They have even evolved special units inside their organization for helping with this problem. There are offices dealing with legislative relations, press affairs, and community liaison. There are often dozens of "advisory boards" designed to grant interested clients a chance to influence bureaucracies in exchange for support. And there is inevitably a chief counsel's office to assist the manager in interpreting his legal requirements, to make predictions about what the courts will do in response to his actions,

and to help him frame his actions in ways that add the legitimacy of the law to whatever legitimacy can be mustered from politics and expertise.

The importance of developing a mandate for themselves, their programs, their policies, or their organizations is rooted in four special parts of the public manager's job. One aspect is that a public manager acquires public money and authority by accepting the burden of a specific mandate. Legislative and political overseers, like banks making investments, parcel out their money and authority to public managers under terms specified in their mandate. The terms of the mandate thus become the public manager's routes to the resources he needs to accomplish public purposes as well as the terms under which he will operate.

A second feature is that a relatively steady and well-defined mandate advantages the manager in the development of operational capacities consistent with this mandate. Partly it is time and consistency which helps the manager with the painfully slow tasks of building operational capacities in his organization. But a fixed mandate also becomes an inevitable piece of reality to the organization to which individual aspirations in the organization must yield. Just as competition and financial pressures empower managers in private sector firms as they tailor operations to fit in a new competitive environment, a fixed set of political/legal demands on a public organization equip a public manager to influence his

organization. The manager can become "reality's agent" in confronting his organization rather than simply someone with a new idea.

A third feature of a strong mandate is that it has special importance to public managers who must try to get things done through organizations and individuals that they don't directly control -- that is, for those who regulate, manage intergovernmental programs, procure goods and services from the private sector, or are dependent on the voluntary cooperation of private individuals to help them with their task. At a minimum, a strong mandate (whether for broad or narrow purposes) is important because it makes it difficult for the independent organization to resist the administrative efforts of the public agencies to move them in the directions required. If there is widespread enthusiasm for environmental cleanup, or great national urgency about building new weaponry, it will be harder for chemical firms and defense contractors to resist managerial efforts designed to spur them towards these social goals. Conversely, if there is little enthusiasm for these goals, or intense conflict that leads to frequent oscillations in mandates, resistance is quite feasible. Beyond this, however, a mandate becomes a means for accomplishing public purposes -- particularly in situations where the government is dependent on voluntary compliance or assistance from large numbers of private individuals. This might be true in organizing tax collections, in cleaning city streets or in preventing crime and police corruption. In effect, politics as the mobilization of

privately under-taken public activity is sometimes a tool of production as well as the source of basic resources such as money, authority, and purpose.

Given the importance of mandates to public managers, it is perhaps not surprising that they work hard on shaping them, and giving them strength and coherence. But this enterprise, too, involves public managers in tasks that previously might not have been considered important parts of their jobs. They persuade and negotiate with political and legislative overseers, with bureaucratic peers, and with powerful subordinates about their purposes, authority and money. They try to manage the climate of public opinion and conventional wisdom through press relations and the maintenance of close ties with professional associations or "issue networks." They manage the specialized staffs described above. And they take actions to invest choices they make with different attributes of legitimacy: broad political agreement emerging from a fair process of deliberation; consistency with both the spirit and letter of the laws granting powers to them; strong technical bases verified by expert opinion; and perhaps even some connection between the current decision and a compelling vision of the "public interest." But all this takes time and attention, and is a crucial part of doing the job of a public manager, for without this work, it is hard for managers to organize production effectively.

## VI. Summary

So, the simple abstractions used to describe the public manager's job turn out to challenge traditional notions of this job, and to expand the moral and professional challenges of performing them well. An important question is why would anyone accept this characterization of the job over other more traditional concepts. We have three answers to this question arranged in descending order of merit, but ascending order as an explanation of the sources of our conception.

The first is that we think our characterization of the job is more loyal to the prevailing terms and conditions of public managers jobs than the traditional conception. In our cases, we see discretion in the use of public authority and resources not only at the top of organizations and at the bottom, but also in the middle. We find mid-level operating managers making decisions about how to use forests or hospital clinics in consultation with local groups in a process that resembles politics. We find federal regional managers negotiating with local governments over objectives for nursing homes and employment programs even in situations where federal regulations are relatively unambiguous. Moreover, we see that this discretion is both used well and justified when the manager joins knowledge of the substance of the issue, with an interest in investing his decision with legitimacy, and a capacity to assure that the decision is reliably executed. To the extent that our conception orients the manager to important parts of his job (perhaps even exaggerating

elements they are most likely to ignore), we think the conception is more valuable than one that obscured important parts of the job.

The second point is that our conception of public management focuses on what we take to be the primary problem of public management: the integration of substantive purpose, political authorization, and operational capacity. Such integration is the task of general management. Without it purposes are not achieved, or what is achieved brings little satisfaction to clients or overseers of the enterprise. In effect, this simple conception becomes the first of an increasingly elaborate set of check-lists to help managers avoid two of the most common forms of human stupidity: forgetting what one is trying to accomplish; and letting one's aspirations and ambitions overwhelm a more cold-eyed assessment of what is possible.

The third element sustaining this conception of public management is that it draws effectively on the skills and orientations of the people now working in the field at the Kennedy School. Most of our practical experience is at "policy levels" of the government where substance, politics, and administration are joined. Moreover, the tradition of public policy training forces our continuing attention to the question of what outcomes of public value are being produced in addition to concerns about the maintenance of institutional arrangements. And much of our academic experience is in political science with its concerns about legitimacy rather than organizational theory with its explanations of what determines the operating

characteristics of organizations. So, it is perhaps not surprising that we would find room in our conception of public management for setting purposes and political management as well as for administering organizations and building new operational capabilities. More importantly, however, this conception also provides a framework that can both inspire, and be embellished by the talented people now at the Kennedy School. The specific accomplishment recorded within this framework will be our next subject. But before turning to that, it is useful to bring this discussion to a close by describing what has happened to the traditional concerns of public administration.

What is downplayed in our conception (at least as a relative matter) is the administrative aspects of management: the business of designing or operating within management systems that insure managers will be accountable for their utilization of material and financial resources. While our interest in traditional management systems has been relatively de-emphasized, it is important to understand that we have not abandoned a concern for operational performance of public sector organizations. The traditional concern with the "ministerial" functions of public management (i.e., with the construction of accounting, budgeting and personnel systems) has been transformed into a more dynamic notion of using these administrative tools not only to guarantee current accountability and control, but also to develop new operational capacities suited to the demands of the future environment of the organization. In effect, simply accounting for activity has

been transformed into the task of creating things of public value at low cost, and positioning the organization within a changing environment. This adds the design of production processes and the utilization of management information systems to traditional concerns with budgeting, personnel management, and organizational structure.

What emerges, then, is a concept of a public manager as a small scale statesman of operational bent. He assumes responsibility for setting purposes and investing them with legitimacy, and for using the authority and resources he has been granted to reliably achieve those purposes. He spends a part of his time shaping his mandate, and the other part of his time using his mandate and administrative devices which direct the use of resources to the accomplishment of his purposes. He understands that his overseers have merely lent him authority and resources: they can be withdrawn or constrained in various ways if they become suspicious of his operations. At the same time, they respect his expertise and depend on him to carry out their wishes. His subordinates look to him for protection from unwarranted intrusion by overseers, and hope for leadership in the form of substantive purposes that they can admire or endure. They also depend on the manager to design and utilize administrative systems in ways that give consistent instructions and treat them fairly as they carry out their jobs. In all, it is a challenging but doable conception of a public manager's job.