

PUBLIC POLICY V. PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: Different in Character, Both Critical for Success

By Richard F. Keevey

What distinguishes public policy from public administration?

A casual review might lead one to the conclusion that the gradations are subtle and amount to nominal differences. However, this perspective is incorrect because it ignores significant variances in the realm of public service.

Some think public administration to be less important—and certainly less interesting—than dramatic encounters over public policy. To the extent that government evokes the romantic or adventurous, politics and policy strike that chord. Yet neither politics nor policy would have any significance beyond headlines and debates without effective implementation and day-to-day management.

In *The Federalist Papers*, Alexander Hamilton observed, “A government ill executed whatever it may be in theory, must be, in practice, a bad government.”

Administration breathes life into policy. It transforms an idea into tangible results. The success of almost every initiative pivots on the quality and caliber of its execution. Absent skillful management, even the best policy idea will disappoint the body politic. The most promising international treaties and most sweeping health care plans would yield negligible gains if not properly managed.

In this respect, public administration displays incredible breadth, encompassing school teachers, air traffic controllers and managers of the Medicare system. At every point in this vast network, citizens expect their government to function effectively, fairly and efficiently. This cannot happen without competent and dedicated administrators.

No one appreciated this better than Woodrow Wilson. He wrote, “The science of management will seek to straighten the paths of government, to make its business less unbusinesslike, to strengthen and purify its organization and to crown its duties with dutifulness.”

Proper Linkages between Policy and Management

Do not conclude that I see no role for public policy. I do. Policy and administration must interact and relate. Although I consider myself an administrator first, I made a significant impact on policy during my time in government, as both the OMB director for a state and chief financial officer at two federal agencies.

Here are examples of how public administrators and policymakers can be effective together:

- When policymakers develop ideas and strategies, administrators can provide insights for how best to operationalize them.
- Conversely, when administrators have great ideas but are unable to turn them into policy, they can reach out to the wonks for help.
- Once policy has been enacted, administrative tweaking is necessary to make its implementation work smoothly.

Policy and administration are interwoven, though each has a separate motivation. This dichotomy developed because management reformers in the early 20th century—Dwight Waldo, Luther Gulick and Max Weber among them—desired to separate politics from daily government operation. They wanted business-like efficiency but knew administrators must respect policymakers and ensure that long-range policy goals are executed properly, provide for continuity and avoid conflicts of interest and corruption to preserve public support.

Public and Private Management

What distinguishes the virtues of public management and its link to public policy from its equivalents in the private sector? “Management is management” is a pithy enough aphorism. Indeed, it contains an element of truth. Regardless of the setting, management involves organization and motivation of people, proper deployment of



resources, negotiation of conflict and decision-making. Further, the divisions between public and private management are growing increasingly opaque, especially as the two intermingle more frequently, either through privatization ventures or government-adopted corporate models.

That said, the differences between public and private management are fundamental and real. The business of government is not business. It is serving the public. In some respects, the discussion begins and ends with this statement, but the delineation comes into sharper focus through social scientific analysis.

Paul Appleby, former dean of the Maxwell School at Syracuse University, noted how prevailing attitudes often overlook the distinct role of the public manager. He wrote, "Many of us fail to recognize the need of having persons thinking and acting like government officials." Persons attracted to and successful in public administration typically possess what he described as a "government attitude" or "public-interest attitude."

Appleby observed that government differs from the corporate world in areas like its broad scope, dependence on public accountability and political character. In addition, it stands apart from business in its nature and design. Government holds equal concern for everyone and remains subject to public scrutiny. This may result in what the private sector might see as inefficiencies. Given that they force government to operate more in the public interest, Appleby concluded that "the net effect is to make government more efficient in terms of its central purpose."

Graham Allison of the Kennedy School echoes several of Appleby's sentiments, adding the wry line of demarcation that public and private management "are fundamentally alike in all unimportant respects." He concurs with my earlier observation that "management is management," but suggests that the environment of a public or private organization significantly alters the form and substance of certain functions. For example, he notes that governments deal with narrower time horizons, vaguer performance standards, tighter personnel constraints, greater concern for equity in decisionmaking, multiple stakeholders, frequent legislative and judicial involvement and a lack of a discernible bottom line.

President scholar Richard Neustadt also emphasized many of these distinctions in observing the major differences between the duties required of the president of the United States and those of corporate CEOs, like time constraints, limits on authority, media relations and profitability measures. Neustadt's comparisons are at the highest level, but they capture the same differences between most public managers and private sector counterparts.

A Final Observation

I suggest that there are three principal goals for the public administrator: manage programs efficiently and effectively; ensure that the processes and results are accountable to the public; and be involved with policymakers before and after decisions are made.

Policy and administration are invariably intertwined. They are dependent on one another. Just as the CEO depends on line managers to translate ideas into actions, policymakers rely on administrators to translate policy into practice. Open dialogue between the two practices is vital to ensure both the organizational goals of efficiency and effectiveness and the democratic goals of equity, transparency and sound public policy.

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