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## A Public Manager Looks Back: What I Wish I'd Been Taught

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# A Public Manager Looks Back:

# What I Wish I'd Been Taught

Dan H. Fenn

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*The author, a practitioner-teacher of public administration, writes that the special context of government in the United States, whether federal, state, or local, needs to be specifically explored by schools for would-be public managers. The constitutionally established system of fractionated power at once makes government jobs extraordinarily difficult and provides great opportunities for those who see themselves as partners in the policy-making process and want to put their stamp on the events of their times. Despite the view of the general public, government is made to order for entrepreneurs who are adept at accreting and maintaining power regardless of the organizational level at which they are operating. Specifically, public managers need a solid grounding in the liberal arts; a systematic way of understanding and analyzing the various independent power centers that shape public policy; the ability to analyze and control their managerial style so it will fit a system that operates more through accommodation than direction; and exposure to the body of theoretical and practical knowledge now being assembled about the process of negotiation through which public policy is made.*

*This article is based on the Wohlman Distinguished Lecture that was presented by the author at Baruch College, City University of New York, in October of 1982.*

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Thirty-five years of public service which have taken me from the Lexington Town Meeting to the White House and back again, reinforced by a like period spent teaching in a wide variety of graduate management programs, have generated some personal observations on the training of public managers. I offer these observations not as a scholar, despite the years I have spent as a teacher, but rather as a practitioner whose teaching and writing have served to enrich workaday experiences in appointed and even in some minor elective offices.

In thinking about this topic, I am concerned more with the context within which public management courses are presented than with any specific curriculum. An understanding of the nature and shape and underlying realities of the public sector in this unique Ameri-

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can system is far more important than knowledge of statistics and budgeting and quantitative analysis, significant as that material may be.

What, I have been asking myself, do I wish I had understood when I began working in this field; what do I wish I knew or knew how to do better or more systematically today? Looking back, what do I wish my various bosses had known so that my jobs would have gone more smoothly?

The ideas that follow are directed at those who are concerned with the preparation and training of public *managers* at all levels and in all jurisdictions, whether state, local, or federal. (There are differences, of course, and they are important ones, but the similarities across levels and jurisdictions are far more meaningful, in my experience, than the dissimilarities.) I underscore the word *managers* because government, like industry and the so-called third sector (nonprofits), includes thousands of women and men whose responsibilities are essentially staff in nature, people who spend their days researching, analyzing, observing, evaluating, and recommending for those who have the ultimate decision-making authority. Or, to be more precise and to avoid the endless arguments over the differences at the margin between staff people and line people, I am concerned with the *managerial* portions of a person's job, however the position description may read or the lines may be drawn on the organization chart.

Happily, we seem now to have passed through the time when, in the public sector, the term *manager* was almost one of approbrium. In Washington during the 1960s, the federal service was presumed to be separated into two classes, and unequal ones at that. The managers were considered a lower order—glorified clerks really, whose jobs were made up of the mundane, technical, and essentially irrelevant pursuits of procurement, budgeting, and personnel administration. The “serious, important” people in town were called “policymakers.” I remember one assistant secretary of state who proclaimed with some pride that he did not care about the budget or personnel matters in his division; after all, his job was to make Far Eastern policy.

The misguided notion that one can “make policy” without accepting the responsibilities of “management” was imbedded in the first Hoover Commission Report, which led to the establishment of permanent assistant secretaries for administration in the Cabinet departments, people who stayed in their jobs from administration to administration.<sup>1</sup> This plan served the interests of the career civil service and of the internal politics of that system and the people in it far better than it served the concerns of those charged with establishing and running federal programs. We have now come to realize, as the business community always did, that the notion that one can determine and effectuate a program or a policy without managing the funds and people involved is a dangerous myth.

With this realization has come an increasing interest in the training of those people who will take on the responsibility of running public agencies and programs—people whose job it is to make things happen—along with the consequent growth of courses in management and in policy analysis.

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### Liberal Arts Education Is Needed

As I ponder this matter of education for public management, I find myself increasingly convinced that the proper setting is in graduate schools or executive programs for practicing officials—not the undergraduate level. There is no substitute on the job for a solid grounding in the liberal arts, a total immersion in the disciplines of the social sciences and the humanities, for the would-be government official.



For one thing, there are the lessons of history, and the nonlessons. Profs. Ernest R. May and Richard E. Neustadt of Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government have reminded us that too many policy disasters have been constructed, or at least rationalized, on the basis of a misreading of precedents.<sup>2</sup> The fact is that the situation confronting Chamberlain in dealing with Hitler at Munich bore a minimal resemblance to the one faced in the 1950s and 1960s by U.S. policymakers working with the complexities of the incursions and instigated uprisings by North Vietnam in South Vietnam. But the importance of understanding the roots of problems and the efforts to deal with them in the past—the sensitivity to the *differences* between situations as well as the similarities—is too obvious to be worth belaboring here. A liberal arts education, it is hoped, can contribute to this kind of sensitive reading of the historical lessons.

Further, a sense, a tasting, of the enduring complexities of humankind and human relations, whether provided by Shakespeare, the Bible, or the world's great novels, is indispensable to the man or woman who aspires to work successfully and effectively in the real world. The public manager labors every minute of every day with the volatile stuff of human emotions: desires, aspirations, sensitivities, jealousies, fears, ambivalences, dependencies.

Finally, the central and enduring questions of politics and political theory should be so ingrained in the public manager that they come to the surface intuitively. Whether it is the implications of “*Sed quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*” (“But who is to guard the guards themselves?”) or Burke on the role of the representative or Hamilton and Jefferson wrestling with the issue of efficiency versus responsiveness in a free society or the sensitivity of the founding fathers to unintended consequences—to secondary and tertiary effects—as well as their decent regard for posterity, the public manager's *weltanschauung* needs to be formed in terms of basic premises and realities and dilemmas. Automatically, when someone says “cost/benefit analysis,” she should think, “Whose costs and whose benefits?” Intuitively she should be alert to the havoc of a Torquemada, a Savonarola, or a Joe McCarthy when someone self-righteously uses terms like *patriotic* and *morality* and phrases like “the right thing to do” and “Americanism and the American Way” as policy yardsticks. John Adams proclaimed a government of laws, not men; the aspiring public manager needs to view that sentiment with a ready skepticism, a full understanding that statutes and procedures do not control great events but people do, albeit within the broad framework established by our laws and Constitution. Even Murphy's law, which states that if something can go wrong, it will, needs to be a part of the manager's thought processes.

To stint lessons such as these, to miss the sophomore bull sessions on the meaning of justice and the role of God in history in order to concentrate on the public budgeting process or on the workings of the state civil service system in Minnesota is to do the prospective public manager and the society at large a severe disservice.

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### Three Basic Premises

In my view, an effective and relevant program in public management should be based on three premises:

1. Public-sector jobs are inordinately difficult, more so than those in any other sector.
2. All public managers are, to varying degrees, policymakers, not merely people who implement policy.

3. A government position is a hunting license, not a precisely defined charter.

### ***The Difficulty of Public-Sector Jobs***

Government management jobs are extremely challenging. They are difficult because they deal with complex issues, often highly technical in nature, where decisions must be made in the face of limited and undeveloped data. They are difficult because the framers of the U.S. Constitution consciously set out to fractionate political power, thus making the implementation of policy very complicated. And they are difficult because they frequently involve the resolution of problems where the “right” and the “ought” are on both sides of the question, so the decision comes down to which “right” (or which “wrong”) one is going to favor.

Unfortunately, prevailing public attitudes toward government jobs do not conform to this fact. Rather, Americans hold curiously inconsistent views on this matter, as on so many others. We seem to assume that running programs in the public sector is easy, while the challenge of manufacturing and selling lemon-scented furniture polish is really tough.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, we seem to believe that the government, as opposed to the furniture polish business, is a managerial disaster.

I say inconsistent because, logically, if running a government were easy, if anyone could do it, government could not be a mess. The way we reconcile the inconsistency is, incidentally, both intriguing and ingenious: we employ a kind of intellectual alchemy that magically transforms the best and the brightest into the village idiot the minute she or he accepts a government post, elected or appointed! (Yet we bemoan the fact that so many good people eschew the public service, and look back in fond recollection to the days of Camelot.)

The assumption that government jobs are simple is not a phenomenon of the 1980s. Both the spoils system and the civil service reform movement that it spawned at the end of the last century were based on the premise that government jobs are relatively easy, that virtually anyone can accomplish them and that consequently they do not demand any special training or experience. The theoretical underpinning of the spoils system was that in a people’s democracy, government offices should be manned by the people. Civil service reform rested on the premise that there are no generalized managerial skills and no expertise peculiar to the public sector: that government jobs are merely a collection of special tasks such as loan officer or real estate appraiser or lawyer or engineer or economist which are completely interchangeable with similar jobs in the private sector. In marked contrast to the British system, therefore, we have a program that ostensibly encourages lateral entry from outside the career ranks.

To be sure, lateral entry is an idea that, at least at the federal level, has never really worked except for discrete groups like scientists and lawyers. The intake from the outside, into the career system at other than the entering grade (as opposed to noncareer “political” appointments), is minuscule. But on paper, at least, the system places no particular premium on experience in the public sector as a qualification for appointment.

This pervasive view that government is easy to manage produces some specific unfortunate results. For one thing, we continue to succumb to simplistic solutions for complex managerial problems. In Carter’s time, the quick fix was reorganization. In Johnson’s it was the Planning and Programming Budget System; in Nixon’s it was central control from the White House and the Ash Commission’s recommendations. Now it’s staff reduction: get rid of people on the public payroll and it will all run better.



*Built-in complexity.* I have stated above that public-sector management was designed to be difficult by the founding fathers. Had they wanted efficiency, as equated with speed of decision making, they would have followed Hamilton's advice; instead we have checks and balances.

Their alternative, obviously, was to build an organization on a hierarchical, pyramidal basis. The boss at the top makes decisions and choices, which are passed down and overseen by succeeding levels of managers, who are increasingly specialized, to the mass of those who implement—also layered—down below.<sup>4</sup> To make it work, you have to leave that top official alone to do the task that has been assigned to him. You have to “get off his back,” to echo a cry widely heard in this country a dozen years ago. You also need a work force down through the structure that will be compliant and dutiful.

In contrast, look at the position of a public-sector manager at any level. Far from sitting on the apex of a pyramid—by definition, physically and psychologically a painful spot—the government officer finds herself placed in the middle of a wheel of power centers, relatively independent of the person running the program and of each other. Prof. Wallace S. Sayre of Columbia University first described this phenomenon, relating it to the federal bureau chief in many writings and speeches. In my view, all public officials, from the president on down, operate in that type of organizational environment. “In Washington you can never do anything by yourself,” a two-star general told me recently.

Elsewhere I have set forth a categorization of these power centers, aggregating them under seven headings: the White House (or governor's or mayor's office); the legislature (or city council); one's own boss; the media; one's own staff; interested nongovernmental groups; and other government agencies.<sup>5</sup> Obviously, each of these categories includes a mixed collection of elements that are supportive, opposed, or neutral toward what the manager in the middle is trying to do. Further, the individual power centers are constantly forming alliances with each other, using and being used by each other. A woman's staff, disaffected by what she is doing, capitalizes on their contacts on the Hill or in the press corps to launch an attack on her. A man from another agency, sensing an encroachment on his turf, takes his case to the legislature or to the governor's office.

It is this wheel of independent power centers with their ever shifting alliances that has come to be called the “authorizing environment” of the American public manager. Note the term *environment*, rather than *authority*, because therein lies the great departure from the common perceptions of how the system works in this country.

Further, the manager has the power, if he wishes to use it, to help shape that authorizing environment. He need not be passive in the face of it but can be in partnership, albeit commonly a junior partner.

Since the public manager works in an environment of fractionated power, surrounded by a collection of independent centers, the process of management and the accomplishment of objectives in the public sector depend upon the manager's skill, not just in persuasion, as described in Richard E. Neustadt's seminal work,<sup>6</sup> but in the ability to fashion programs and policies that attract enough support and neutralize enough opposition so that something reasonable comes out at the other end. It is a process of compromise, accommodation, and amalgamation, and it is a very delicate operation indeed. George Reedy, in analyzing the performance of Lyndon Johnson and Sam Rayburn during their salad days in the Congress, has said many times that it was precisely this skill, not the much publicized arm-twisting, that accounted for their success. They were both geniuses, he observes, at sensing what would work and at fashioning legislation that would garner the needed support.

Power, then, is fractionated, and the manager must assemble and reassemble and maintain it around each issue as it comes up. It is more than the checks and balances we heard about from our junior high civics teacher; it is a highly volatile, complex set of shifting interrelationships, personal and institutional, with which the manager must deal, and it is different for each policy he is trying to effectuate. To work it successfully, the government official needs well-developed sensing mechanisms and a special talent for negotiation and accommodation.

Then there is the matter of interpretation, and the conflicting rights therein. Consider the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation Regional Administrator dealing with the request of the Greater New York Savings Bank to establish a new branch shortly after the passage of the Community Reinvestment Act of 1977.<sup>7</sup> The statute mandated that regulated financial institutions have a continuing and affirmative obligation to conduct their deposit and credit activities so as to meet the convenience and needs of the communities in which they are located and which they serve. The law requires, further, that these institutions demonstrate they have, in fact, done so. Some neighborhood activists said that greater New York was not doing "enough," whatever that may have meant; the bank and its supporters said they were complying with the requirements. This is inevitably a judgment call, not a factual one.

How about the International Trade Commissioner being called upon to decide whether "an industry in the United States is being or is likely to be injured by reason of the importation" of dumped merchandise? What is "an industry"—is it one plant in Colorado making square black jellybeans? Or is it the entire candy industry? What does "injured" mean—the loss of a single potential sale, or a significant reduction of profit and work force? What does "by reason of" mean—and how do you sort out this variable from everything else going on in the economy? How "likely" does injury have to be for there to be likelihood? And so the list goes on, with each interpretation central to a final judgment that will set a priority on competing claims.

Finally, public-sector jobs are difficult because the facts with which they deal are extraordinarily complex. Take, for example, the much researched history of the feared swine flu epidemic in 1976.<sup>8</sup> In February of that year, four cases (one fatal, though complicated by other factors) appeared among recruits at Fort Dix, New Jersey. The strain involved was not the common Victoria flu, but one generally restricted to pigs. None of the four who contracted the flu had had contact with swine, nor had any of the five hundred men who tested positively for antibodies but never fell ill; so the disease was clearly passed from human to human. With full awareness of the post-World War I pandemic that had killed five hundred thousand Americans, policymakers had to decide whether to launch a nationwide vaccine production and a combined private-public immunization program as quickly as possible in order to inoculate everyone in the country—not just the high-risk population—at a cost of \$134 million.

In order to make this decision, answers to the following questions, among others, were required:

1. Was an epidemic likely, and, if so, how likely? When he asked that question, Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) secretary David Matthews was told by departmental scientists, "We don't know. The odds are between 1 percent and 99 percent."
2. Would this be a virulent epidemic? Again, the scientists could not predict, because they could not assess the power of the virus.



3. Was the virus spreading at that time, without symptoms being evident? No one knew.
4. Was this really the World War I virus? The conventional wisdom was that the postwar outbreak was swine flu, but since methods for identifying viruses in those days were primitive, no one knew for sure.
5. Since the vaccine would have to be manufactured from chicken eggs, could enough eggs be produced quickly enough to make enough vaccine?
6. Could some combination of public and private health-delivery systems be put together quickly enough and efficiently enough to do the job in time, since immunization does not occur immediately?
7. How would the public and the medical community react to this program?
8. What liabilities would the government and the manufacturers assume?

And so the imponderables piled up, scientific dilemmas for which there were no clear and incontrovertible data.

This dramatic example is replicated at all levels of government every day. Public officials constantly have to make judgments in complex matters on the basis of limited economic and scientific facts. More often than not, for the public manager, there is no safety in numbers—in quantifiable information—though there may be considerable help for him in such analyses.

### *The Manager as Policymaker*

The second premise upon which a realistic educational program should be based is that policy-making, policy recommendation, and the implementation of policy are inextricably mixed in any public-sector managerial task. The late Prof. Raymond A. Bauer used to say that the interrelationship of these elements is more like a spiral ascending in the shape of a cone than it is a striated pyramid.

This view of the public manager's job flies in the face of a great deal of public administration theory going back to 1887, when Woodrow Wilson's famous essay on the subject was published.<sup>9</sup> Wilson and his successors basically took the position that administration is a science, clearly distinct from policy-making, and that the process is the same, regardless of the context: Czarist Russia, the democratic United States, U.S. Steel, King Edward's England, and Kaiser Wilhelm's Germany were all managed in fundamentally the same way, with the same objectives of efficiency and the prudent use of resources. The making of policy, however, was quite another enterprise.

This notion of a dichotomy between policy-making and policy administering or implementing which Wilson laid out in his article is still extraordinarily alive in the rhetorical world of the practicing government manager, if not in the operating world, and it appears and reappears in the pronouncements of elected and appointed officials alike in all jurisdictions and at all levels of the public sector.

Wilson went on to say that government should adopt what he perceived to be the guiding principles of business organization: centralization, hierarchy, and discipline. (One cannot help wondering, people being people, whether business or any other organization ever really functioned in such a nice, clean fashion, but no matter—this philosophy was and remains the prevailing view.) Wilson was Hamiltonian in his belief that the messy debates that characterized his definition of "politics" should be confined to the legislative branch



and the very highest reaches of the executive. Once policy was set, he thought, it should be implemented loyally by a skilled, professional group of managers and operators. "Administration lies outside the proper sphere of politics. Administrative questions are not political questions. Although politics sets the task for administration, it should not be suffered to manipulate its offices," he said.<sup>10</sup>

The difficulties with this view, and with similar ones espoused by scholars like Profs. Frank J. Goodnow and William F. Willoughby,<sup>11</sup> lie not in the theoretical concepts but in the assumption that the real world of the public manager does, could, or should operate according to the theory. Any empiricist will quickly discover that, in reality, policy-making and policy implementing become so "intertwined," to use an exquisitely descriptive word coined by one of my children, as to be like the marbling in a marble cake: impossible to separate and, at the margin, very difficult to distinguish.

Furthermore, and this is the more significant point for our purposes, Wilson's thinking implies, if it did not state, that the government is divided between those who make policy and those who implement it, that one worker falls into one category and another into the other. In my view, jobs themselves can, indeed, be divided that way: position X has A percent of policy-making, B percent of policy advising, and C percent of implementing. But the fact that public officials' responsibilities can be sorted that way does not mean that as managers people can be classified according to the policy-making/policy implementing divider (I refer here to the executive branch, of course, not to the legislative); for all managers, from the president on down, perform all three functions.

A host of distinguished political scientists and public administrators have taken serious issue with the Wilson thesis.<sup>12</sup> To anyone who takes even a casual glance at the day-to-day life of a government executive, the evidence is so obvious that one would presume no one would be using this formulation any longer.

Nevertheless, it persists among practitioners (though not scholars) of public administration. No less an observer and practitioner than former Harvard president James Bryant Conant, writing his great book about schools in the United States, proclaimed that school committees and boards should make policy and the career people should implement that policy.<sup>13</sup> The chairman of a local board of selectmen will readily tell you that the board makes policy and the town manager implements it, and that this is the way the world should be organized. Richard Nixon and his Ash Commission sought to restructure the government according to this theory; Reagan operatives, from Anne Gorsuch of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to Donald Devine of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), trumpeted the distinction at every opportunity and sought to run their agencies according to their own dictum, incidentally with highly unfortunate results.

The stubbornness with which the concept survives is a tribute to its simplicity and orderliness. It appears to make organizations easy to understand and to describe. It conforms to a cultural notion in the United States about how things should be done. It dovetails with the language we use ("my people," "the boss," "the president today ordered").

Even more, the concept survives because it serves the interests, periodically, of both parties. An administrator really appreciates the ability to say to her boss, "You are involving yourself in administration! You should stick to making policy and let me implement it for you!" Translation: "You are messing around in my internal politics, procedures, and independence. Get out, and concern yourself with things I don't care about." I once served on a school board with an experienced and superbly skillful superintendent. Early in his tenure, he set us to writing a policy for the Lexington Public Schools. While we

struggled for months with the distinctions between “and/or” versus “and, or,” he ran the schools unimpeded.

By the same token, the boss’s interests are often served by telling off the “pointy-headed bureaucrats,” or at least telling the press and the party faithful that “those civil-service types think they are running this place; they are trying to make policy around here! Who elected them to anything? I’m the policymaker!”

The exact mix of the government manager’s job is determined by several factors. Level in the “hierarchy” is, clearly, one element. No one would dispute that presidents and governors have a higher proportion of policy-making in their mix than do bureau or section chiefs. But this factor is by no means the only determinant. Managers of new programs or visible ones, often of programs that are controversial; managers whose bosses are disinterested, or interested in other parts of their jobs; managers who are physically located away from their supervisors; managers who are cursed with “superiors” who are dim bulbs or manipulable—all these and more find themselves with a high degree of policy-making in the amalgam of their day-to-day activities, regardless of the language in their job descriptions or the writings of public administration theorists. How many city and town managers, in fact, merely implement legislative or executive policies, despite the perceptions of those who established the city management movement?

Still other variables that affect the amount of policy-making in the mix are the style and objectives of the manager herself. Because the system is complex, because the manager inevitably has some power and can accrete more, an official committed to a point of view, to a mission and vision for her shop, can increase the proportion of policy-making and advising and decrease the implementation segment. It is axiomatic that individuals shape their jobs—that the style and performance vary with the person, that different people with precisely the same formal job description interpret and define the words in their own terms. In the public sector, because of the characteristics I have mentioned above, this is especially true.

The pitfalls and dangers of the policy/administration dichotomy were dramatized by reminiscences of Carter administration officials who pointed out that President Carter and his people, believing in the neat distinction between the two, had formulated “policy” in isolation and had then tried to sell and implement it, instead of recognizing that the formulation has to be in terms of its managerial and political viability.

### *Government Jobs as Hunting Licenses*

The third premise, like the first two, flows from the nature of our governmental system: a government job is not a charter but a hunting license, and the public servant who explicitly recognizes that fact will become more of a partner in the policy-making process, rather than merely one who implements policy.

I became aware of this characteristic of the public sector some years ago when I put together a weekend seminar at the Harvard Business School for three groups of businessmen. I chose several businessmen who were then in government, several who had been, and several who thought they might want to be.

After the first day or so, it was clear that the third group simply was not communicating with the other two, and vice versa. I could not figure out why they were talking past each other until suddenly I realized that the people in the group who had never served were conceptualizing a government position as a precise, well-bordered project with clear goals, objectives, resources, authority, and accountability. The old hands knew, of course, that to govern is to choose, to assemble power, to negotiate, to accommodate, and to develop strategy.



Public-sector management is synonymous with making choices among possible policy initiatives and differing interpretations of commonly vague and infinitely adjustable statutes, regulations, and instructions. The environment of fractionated power enables the manager, to a degree not understood by the general public or even by many public officials themselves, to make such choices and make them stick. Colonel North, with what now appears to have been often vague and quite general “authorization” but with a great deal of energy and patriotic conviction, was able to piece together power centers inside and outside the government and make things happen—at least, so the Tower Commission asserts.<sup>14</sup> This kind of entrepreneurial (or, as some are now calling it, “intrapreneurial”) talent finds a fertile environment in a system of fractionated power.

Which side of the job does an incoming town manager choose to emphasize—procurement, evaluating personnel, developing and working with a corps of community volunteers, getting the street department going on potholes, or establishing a power base of his own so he can be maximally independent of the elected officials? When William Ruckelshaus first took over the EPA in 1970, he determined that it should downplay its role in the control of agricultural pesticides and radiation hazards; emphasize clean air and water; move aggressively in the area of litigation, instead of relying on negotiation and voluntary compliance; and create maximum independence of action for itself, especially from control by Richard Nixon and his White House staff.<sup>15</sup> He determined to be highly visible and proactive, instead of making sure that the scientific groundwork had all been laid. By contrast, the first administrator of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), with a similar “charter,” chose precisely the opposite strategy for his agency.

Thus the amalgam of a fractionated authorizing environment (subject to a degree of influence and manipulation by the public manager himself), the broad and vague range of responsibilities, and the general nature of so many statutes and regulations produce a smorgasbord of opportunities for action. One can pick and choose the dishes that best suit one’s tastes and inclinations.

The reality, then, is that managerial jobs in the public sector are totally different from the stultifying, mindless, repetitive chores that the public often perceives them to be. It is true that they can be frustrating; it is true that in comparison to managerial positions in the private sector, they may require a keener sense of strategy for the purpose of accomplishing an objective. But government people have enormous scope, a large field to play upon, if they can be helped to see it and to learn the rules.

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### What Public Managers Need to Know

Given this context—highly challenging jobs with an infinite opportunity to make choices and judgments—what does the would-be public manager need to know?

Obviously, he needs the tools of analysis; they are essential, given the array of factual data that must be a part of public decisions. But he needs to be able to do *political* analyses of situations, as well as scientific and technical ones. Some economists will tell us that if you cannot count it, then it is irrational and unpredictable and invulnerable to thoughtful and planned action. In my experience, however, the politics of a situation, the power relationships, the constellation of interests and concerns are, in fact, as responsive to analysis as are the technical facts of the issue. Policy-making is exquisitely Newtonian, and the occasional reporter who takes the time and trouble to trace a piece of public policy can show us the “why” as well as the “what.”<sup>16</sup>



In fact, the successful managers are doing this kind of analysis all the time, albeit almost always intuitively, rather than consciously and systematically.

### ***Wheel of Power Centers***

To teach political analysis requires that we return to the model of a wheel of power centers surrounding the manager. The public manager needs to know more about each of these power centers and the most effective ways to work with them. The following questions need to be addressed: What are the dynamics of the legislative process? How and where can one have an impact upon this process? What is the history of interested nongovernmental groups in this country? What are their internal dynamics? When can the manager work with them? When does the manager have to confront them, and how? What are the sources of conflict with other agencies, and how can these conflicts be avoided? Or, how can the manager come out ahead if he can't sidestep the conflict? This would include an examination of the manager's relationship with the three key specialists with whom he or she must deal: lawyers, personnel people, and auditors. What are the real, as opposed to the theoretical, powers of the executive, and, in a nonpyramidal structure, what is the manager's actual relationship to that executive as one of the power centers with which he deals? What constitutes a healthy participatory relationship with one's boss, and how does a manager achieve it? What are the real powers in the hands of those who theoretically work for the manager, and how can he manage these people in this kind of environment? What role does the press play, and how does one build an effective strategy for dealing with it? This, then, is something of a survey course, opening up but clearly not exhausting the topic, at least exposing the student to the nature of the world in which he or she will function, and underscoring the importance of understanding and working with these various types of power centers.

### ***Managerial Style and Skills***

Second, the nature of the environment within which the American public manager functions demands a high talent for the management of people. If this environment were not so fluid, if it were indeed hierarchical in structure, one could be content and effective with a direct and authoritarian style. But it is too loose and changeable for that.

Thus, public managers need to be trained to be self-analytical, to understand their own intuitive managerial style and to be capable of adjusting it when the situation demands something different.

In this connection, it is highly unfortunate that we have fallen prey to the dichotomy of "hard" and "soft." Managers, after all, are supposed to be tough. But they are also supposed to be collegial—good listeners, builders of a team of people who have a sense of ownership in the enterprise. "Management by walking around" tells us that bosses are to be coordinators, really, responsive to the values and concerns of the workers. But that sounds soft. Managers should never be that. They should never fail to lead, to follow up, to make sure that everything is buttoned down and functions with maximum efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

We carry this simple screen around with us when we view many areas of public policy-making. One must never be seen as being soft on defense or welfare cheats or criminals or communism. At the same time, we are told, hard-liners are bad because they are rigid in their opposition, they are unthinking, and they commonly pick the most violent of solutions, without sensitivity to the nuances.

In all our wriggling between hard and soft, we have lost track of the true objective: to be effective. Different people and different situations require different approaches. The challenge, then, is to teach people to be effective managers and to eschew the irrelevant polarization. In the words of a recently published book about nuclear policy, there are hawks and doves—and owls.<sup>17</sup> We ought to be training public managers to be owls.

In addition, flexibility is important—the ability to emphasize different skills in different circumstances. Every job in government that I can think of has a standard administrative component, with its emphasis on the timely and efficient use of resources, and a political/public relations piece, an operational awareness of and responsiveness to the conflicting concerns of the interested parties. The state of the program and the external environment establish the maximal mix at any given time.

The history of the development and ultimate elimination of the U.S. effort to build an SST provides an example.<sup>18</sup> In 1963, construction of such an airplane was basically a technical, managerial problem; later it became a bureaucratic one, when an oversight committee under Robert McNamara was established. Finally, in its last days, at the end of 1969, it was a political–public relations tangle, caught up in the mores of “small is beautiful” and environmental protection. It is important, then, for managers in the public sector to be equipped with a range of skills and with the ability to move along that spectrum in response to the nature of the problem they face.

### *The Bargaining Process*

Finally, public managers need to be exposed to the growing body of knowledge about the process of negotiating and bargaining. It stands to reason that things can happen in a non-hierarchical, fractionated power system only through a process of accommodation. Thus, a large part of the public manager’s life is spent negotiating and bargaining, and only occasionally in ordering or in confrontation. It is extremely important, consequently, to understand the process of negotiation, the different circumstances under which it occurs, the variables involved, and the techniques to be used. What is a zero-sum negotiation, or one that is not zero-sum? What is the impact of variables like the number of issues on the table, the number of issues in the background, the time frame, the number of parties, differing priorities, differing constituencies, personal chemistry, short-term versus long-term relationships, the perceptions of the onlooking public, the problems of ratification? What are the ways of handling victory and defeat, and what are the implications of the different ways?

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### **Conclusion**

The public sector in the United States, then, is a unique and special place. Simply lifting the techniques of planning or performance appraisal or quantitative analysis from the private sector will not suffice, either in the field or in the classroom.

If one is the manager of a Six Flags Amusement Park, one hammers out a five-year plan that starts with targets for profits, income, and attendance and is accompanied by statements about the level and categories of investment which one believes will enable the enterprise to reach those targets. With respect to planning for the museum in the John F. Kennedy Library, on the other hand—in the public sector—the budgetary process moves along with very little relationship to agency goals; with no continuity whatsoever; in response to nonprogram pressures and external events; and with vast amounts of uncertainty

from year to year. Without predictable and manageable resources, the term *planning* takes on a very special meaning!

The context within which the management function is to be performed, Woodrow Wilson's comments to the contrary notwithstanding, is all-important for the way in which people and policies are managed. In structuring programs to educate public managers for a free society, we need to present material that explicitly investigates that context and the ways in which it shapes the day-to-day task of the public official. 🐼

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## Notes

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2. Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of Decision-Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1986).
3. Thanks to Prof. Mark Moore of the John F. Kennedy School of Government for this image.
4. See Max Weber, among others; for example, "Bureaucracy," in H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds. and trans., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946).
5. Dan H. Fenn, "Finding Where the Power Lies in Government," *Harvard Business Review* 57, no. 5 (September–October 1979): 144–53.
6. Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1960).
7. *Community Reinvestment Act*, Case #C94-80-336, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Cambridge, Mass.
8. *Swine Flu*, Case #C1479313, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Cambridge, Mass.
9. Woodrow Wilson, "The Study of Administration," *Political Science Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (June 1887): 197–222. Reprint. New York: Kraus Reprint Corporation, 1962.
10. Ibid.
11. See, for example, Frank J. Goodnow, *Politics and Administration: A Study in Government* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1900) and William F. Willoughby, *The Movement for Budgetary Reform in the States*, Studies in Administration [number 4], Institute for Government Research [of the Brookings Institution] (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1918).
12. Among those who have disagreed with the Wilson thesis are Profs. Louis Brownlow, Luther Gulick, Dwight Waldo, Don Price, Lawrence Lynn, and Norton Long, Jr.
13. James Bryant Conant, *The Comprehensive High School: A Second Report to Interested Citizens* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967).
14. *Report of the President's Special Review Board* (Washington, D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, 1987).
15. *William D. Ruckelshaus and the Environmental Protection Agency*, Case #C1674027, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Cambridge, Mass.
16. See, for example, Elizabeth Drew, *Campaign Journal: The Political Events of 1983–1984* (New York: Macmillan, 1985).
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18. *Managing the U.S. Supersonic Transport Program*, Case #9-678-049, Harvard Business School, Cambridge, Mass.