

The Welfare of the People Above All

Barry Quirk

Too much is made of the difference between public sector management and management challenges in the private sector. Public sector management is much the same as any other management. From day to day it involves the effective operational management of service activities. It also involves the strategic management of services: the shape of their design and the nature of their delivery as well as how they should be improved for the better. Finally, public service management involves a major dose of leadership—that blend of competence, confidence and alchemy that seeks to turn a mass of critical people into a critical mass of people.

However, two features of public sector management do distinguish it from the rest of the management discipline:

- The close political context of management action.
- The pervasive requirement for fairness in the design and delivery of services.

An appraisal of these two distinguishing factors will help us answer the question, ‘what is public service management for?’

Working in a Political Environment...

The particular demands on public managers of working closely with politicians has received recent and helpful comment and guidance from my own professional body (Solace, 2006). It is true that senior public sector managers work directly to elected politicians to whom they are accountable. This is one of the key links in the chain of accountability of public services. The visibility and democratic accountability of national and local politicians provides both ambition and energy to public institutions, as well as a personalized channel for the public to continue to hold public services to account. For just as the

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market and competition acts to discipline private firms, so accountability acts to discipline public organizations.

But I do not feel that this form of accountability serves to explain what public service management is for—it just explains how it is performed. Moreover, while the fact of management accountability to politicians personally rather than to citizens impersonally distinguishes the weekly working life of public sector managers from those of private sector managers, it has to be said that (aside from the coalitions and factions of partisan politics) it is not so very different to the close and direct accountability of many private sector managers to their boards. The close relationship between many senior executives and the chairman and non-executive board members who represent the broader body of shareholders is analogous to the relationship between public officials and elected politicians. And I greatly suspect that the tensions between a private sector board and its executives is every bit as ‘up close and personal’ as between elected politicians and public officials.

But accountability to elected politicians is not the only prism through which public managers are held to account or required to give an account of their decisions and actions (Quirk, 1997). Public service managers need to fully disclose their activities, processes and outcomes and be continually open to enquiry from the public.

In the public sector, two issues need to be straight if the managerial and political domains are to mutually support each other. First, it needs to be clear who is deciding—elected politicians or appointed officials? Second, it needs to be clear as to whether advice to politicians (on ‘what is to be done and how’) is to be fully disclosed and transparent to external enquiry. Deciding who decides public questions is complex in government because of the implications of the long-standing convention of ministerial accountability to Parliament. This is not the case in local government where officials are required to have their own constitutional personality and are required to advise both the political executive and those exercising oversight and scrutiny.

Fairness...

The second distinguishing feature of public management is more substantive—this is the pervasive sense of fairness and justice

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throughout public policies. This sense of fairness permeates all issues of public service design and delivery. The following two questions illustrate the point:

- Is it better to deliver an efficient public service that is ineffective or an effective public service that is inefficient?
- Is it better to deliver an effective public service that is inequitable or an equitable public service that is ineffective?

Plainly when presented as starkly as this, effectiveness is primary to efficiency; while, arguably, equity trumps effectiveness. The second answer is arguable as the twin aspects of equity and effectiveness are often closely aligned in public service delivery. But there are examples of effective public services (urban policing for example) which have encountered serious problems in the public eye because, while they are perceived as being delivered effectively, they do not appear to have paid sufficient regard to equity considerations. When push comes to shove, it is usually the case that public services place fairness first, effectiveness second, and efficiency a close third (Quirk, 2005).

However, a key problem with public sector approaches to fairness is that it is too often viewed as a process variable when it ought to be viewed as an outcome variable. This may be why public organizations can often become silted up by internal process disputes about fairness, when instead they should be ever anxious about whether they are delivering fair outcomes. Services are usually in the public sector because fair outcomes are paramount; effectiveness is then central to achieving desired outcomes; and, finally, efficiency is crucial to ensure that optimum use is made of scarce public resources to achieve more outcomes.

But what is a fair outcome when public goods are being allocated, public 'bads' are being regulated and competing claims are being mediated? Fairness in public service delivery cannot be reduced to some simple measure of equity in outcome (although such measures help). Fairness is often about how the 'public interest' is addressed and resolved. And, in the public realm, a sense of fairness includes whether the public consent with how this has been done or at least can safely and peacefully express dissent with how it was done.

In each and every social problem that public managers are trying

to solve, there are varied and diverse interests. Public service managers need to use the compass of the overall public interest when deciding on courses of action to take or lines of advice to offer.

Common Cause, Contribution and Purpose...

Every organization needs managers to plan, budget, organize and review. And every organization needs managers of people, resources, projects, tasks and processes. In all people-intensive organizations, managers need to focus the attention of others on those critical factors that are central to ensuring organizational success. And they also need to shape people's behaviour so as to achieve common cause. This common cause is achieved not simply by managers encouraging collective endeavour ('It's better if you work with others rather than work alone') but, rather, because individuals themselves realize that they are unable to achieve big outcomes through just their little actions. Part of the role of all managers in all organizations is to promote the intrinsic benefits of strong co-operation. In my view, it is essential for management leaders to achieve this sense of common cause across their organization—whether it is in the private sector or the public sector. But responsibility for managing people requires leaders to recognize individual's personal contribution and not simply focus on the overall common agenda or on how people's efforts compare one to another.

People may look for comparison ('am I doing well compared to others?') but ultimately they want their personal contribution to be of value and not just compared. No one has etched on their tombstone—'he was better than his brother'! This deep psychological need for the recognition of one's contribution underlies people's anxiety of league tables and comparisons generally; even though comparisons are inevitable and usually both healthy and useful. As a manager of other people, the 'rule of thumb' should be to first acknowledge the value of someone's contribution before appraising how their efforts compare to others.

Valuing contribution may be crucial, but contribution to what? Most managers would say 'contribution to organizational purpose'. But they would be wrong. People want to contribute to far wider goals than the narrow objectives of any organization. And this is where public service organizations have a massive motivational edge on their

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private sector counterparts. In local government this is easier still. The common cause that conjoins those who work in local government is the welfare of the local community. The purpose of local government is unavoidably crystal clear—‘to improve the quality of life and quality of life-chances of people who live in this locality’. A focus on place and on people in the place. Why is this so important?

A recent book by Zohar and Marshall (2004) has highlighted the vital importance of harnessing people’s intrinsic motivation to heighten organizational effectiveness. The authors develop further the argument of Daniel Goleman (1996) that successful managers need to call on their emotional intelligence to build a broad repertoire of leadership styles. But emotionally intelligent leadership (however difficult it is to achieve) does not of itself generate organizational effectiveness. Zohar and Marshall argue that organizations succeed best when the people that comprise them understand deeply the ‘spirit’ of the organization: not just its rules and procedures but, rather, what the organization is for! And if they personally can connect with this organizational purpose and it resonates with their own sense of personal purpose, then their organization will fly.

So if as a public service leader you can crystallize what your organization is for (not always as simple as it seems), and you can connect your workforce’s need to contribute personally to this wider purpose, you will outperform any private sector comparator—so long, of course, that your many strategies and your multitude of internal accountabilities are designed effectively and delivered efficiently. ■

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