Challenges Confronting Public Administrators

An early-twentieth-century novel (House, 1912), set in the 1920s, depicted the life of an idealistic West Point graduate repelled by the exploitation of the weak by the physically and mentally strong. The young idealist led an army of insurgents in a civil war against government troops and won a decisive victory at the Battle of Elma, in upstate New York. Shortly after his victory, the young general marched on Washington, accepted the formal surrender of the president, and declared himself administrator of the Republic. In the days that followed, the administrator introduced a series of reforms that changed the face of American government, making it truly responsive to the will of the people. Taxes became more progressive, election ballots were shortened, and indigents were guaranteed government employment. The title of the novel? *Philip Dru: Administrator*.

Times have changed. The saga of Philip Dru is an unlikely plot for a modern best-seller. Public administrators seldom are cast as heroes in modern novels. These days, they are more likely to be depicted as shadowy figures who exercise powers similar to those of the fictional Philip Dru but who lack legitimacy for their actions.

But some things do not change. Public administrators still reside in one of the most demanding niches in American life. Admittedly, they are not required, as Philip Dru was, to create a governmental system from scratch, but they are expected to facilitate the workings of one of the most complex governmental systems in the world. What, specifically, are the challenges that face the public administrator today? Part One of this handbook identifies specific challenges that confront public administrators because of changes at different levels of government and in science, technology,
society, and the international arena. This chapter identifies some of the crosscutting features of the challenges discussed both in Part One and throughout the remainder of the handbook.

Five areas, given here in no particular order of priority, capture the challenges of the public sector: (1) maintaining constitutional order, (2) achieving technical competence, (3) coping with public expectations, (4) managing complexity, uncertainty, and change, and (5) behaving ethically. This list makes no claim to empirical validation for all public administrators for all time, but I believe it will be recognizable to many who have recently pursued public service careers.

Maintaining Constitutional Order

A hallmark of American government is its reliance on the Constitution, which serves as the ultimate arbiter for the appropriateness of public and private actions. Although constitutional rule is central to American public administration, the Constitution offers little direct guidance about the role of public administration or public administrators. In fact, as Waldo (1980, p. 66) has observed, “the Constitution does not contain the words administration or management,” and it is clear that the framers “did not envisage an apparatus with even one one-hundredth the size, variety, and complexity of that today.”

Despite the Constitution’s lack of definitiveness, the nation’s founders possessed clear views about the role of administration in American government. Rohr (1986, p. 1) notes that “the word administration and its cognates appears 124 times in The Federalist Papers; more frequently than Congress, President, or Supreme Court.” Rohr argues persuasively that the Constitution legitimates the administrative state, not in the language of the Constitution itself but in the debates between the Federalists and the anti-Federalists that preceded its ratification.

Whether or not one agrees with Rohr, the centrality of the Constitution to American government imposes a special duty on public administrators to behave according to its charter and consistently with its promise. Near the end of the nineteenth century, Woodrow Wilson (1887, p. 201), then a professor of history and political science, had already recognized the challenge of fulfilling this mandate: “It is getting harder to run a constitution than to frame one.” The practical details of administering “with enlightenment, with equity, with speed, and without friction” (pp. 198-199) were becoming more problematic than the constitutional principles being administered.

How can public administrators today, in an era of unprecedented change and complexity, hope to meet a challenge that Woodrow Wilson considered so difficult a hundred years ago? The answer lies in part with the vision of the nation’s founders. They foresaw the values of the American regime maintained through the interaction of three elements: constitutional correctives, honor, and education (Richardson and Nigro, 1987). Public administrators can contribute to the maintenance of constitutional order by
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appreciating and actively supporting the constitutional correctives—among them the separation of powers—that protect against the self-interest of citizens. They must also seek public esteem through their service to others and prepare for it with a well-rounded education about constitutional principles, history, politics, law, government, and management (Richardson and Nigro, 1987). These prerequisites of constitutionally responsible administration are at the core of public administration’s most enduring challenge.

Achieving Technical Competence

One of the foremost expectations of public administrators is that they will be technically capable of performing roles assigned to them by political and administrative superiors and by citizens. Technical competence has been central to public administration since the late nineteenth century. One of the objectives of Woodrow Wilson’s (1887) landmark essay was to improve the personnel of government. In a similar vein, the city manager movement and other progressive reforms of the early twentieth century reflected the commitment of our society to politically neutral competence as a centerpiece of governmental design (Kaufman, 1969).

By itself, however, the requirement for technical competence would not confront a public administrator with a challenge distinguishable from, say, one presented to a business executive, an engineer, or an accountant. But the job domains of public administrators often involve unique challenges, because government has been allocated tasks either that markets are unable to fulfill or that are not deemed appropriate to the private sector. Thus, the public administrator’s challenge is to perform, in a technically competent manner, tasks that are too difficult or too sensitive to be entrusted to other societal institutions.

There are often immense impediments to performing such tasks successfully. For example, after analyzing the history of implementation of a federal jobs program in Oakland, California, Pressman and Wildavsky (1979) concluded that it was a wonder that government could achieve any success at all, given the incredible odds against which such intergovernmental programs had to struggle. Not all government activities necessarily face low prospects for success, but it can be a very humbling experience for an administrator to be asked to preside over programs with relatively small probabilities for success, a success for which cause-effect relations are unknown or only vaguely understood.

As challenging as it is to attain the level of technical competence necessary for effective public service, achieving such competence poses yet another challenge: reconciling technical competence with popular rule. Willbern (1954) observed many years ago that professionalization of the public service has the disadvantage of simultaneously insulating public servants from both political favoritism and political control, in the public interest. Thus, maintaining a balance between professional judgment and popular control is an inevitable extension of the challenge of technical competence.
Coping with Public Expectations

Ladd (1978) has labeled Americans institutional conservatives and operational liberals for their dual propensities: to conserve basic institutional arrangements, and to extend government provision of social and economic programs. At no time was this form of American dualism more prominent than during the California tax revolt of 1978. On the heels of Proposition 13 and the reduction of over $7 billion in public revenues, Californians expressed expectations that services would not be reduced and might in fact be expanded.

One reason for the sometimes puzzling pattern of public expectations is that problems are highly subjective. Lindblom (1980) has observed that public problems are not givens but rather the subjective determinations of participants in the policy process. The public and the media are given to labeling a host of situations as problematic—housing, environment, child care—without any yardstick for measuring the direction and depth of problems (Dery, 1984).

Goodsell (1985) offers a litany of reasons for the substantial, occasionally unrealistic, expectations about American public administration. He suggests that one of the major reasons for the public’s “impossible” expectations is that public administrators are often asked to pursue goals that are inconsistent and contradictory. Another problem is that most public agencies are judged not by their efforts but by the societal outcomes of their actions. Unfortunately, the scope and magnitude of many public problems—poverty, crime, drug abuse, AIDS—are so great that small progress or holding fast may represent enormous accomplishment. But citizens, motivated both by political rhetoric and promises and by their own instincts about human betterment, expect more from public agencies and are not satisfied with holding fast against even intractable problems.

The culture created by public expectations presents public administrators with a vexing paradox (Whorton and Worthley, 1981). They are simultaneously exposed to two sets of philosophical stimuli: one that represents a positive expression of high ideals, and another that represents a negative expression of distrust and limitations. These stimuli leave public administrators facing an awkward reality: “They wear the hat of agent for the social good as well as the hat of incipient wrongdoer” (Whorton and Worthley, 1981, p. 358). The consequences of this paradox of public administrative culture can take several forms: the development of defense mechanisms for resisting change, perceptions that any encroachments by outsiders or other organizational units are adversarial, and establishment of special performance norms for “government work.”

In the face of the American public’s deep ambivalence, public administrators are challenged to maintain perspective on their roles. They must strive to be responsive to citizens’ and clients’ viewpoints, even when these viewpoints conflict with one another. Simultaneously, public administrators must recognize that the public prefers them to be unobtrusive and im-
partial. Finally, public administrators must resist defending their ambiguous position by sacrificing the public interest.

Managing Complexity, Uncertainty, and Change

American public administration today resides in a two-century-old political system designed to enhance complexity—a characteristic that, as we enter the late twentieth century, is reinforced by rapid technological, scientific, economic, and social change. The legacy of the Federalists has endured. Government should not be entrusted to the good intentions of citizens; citizens sought to impose their selfish interests on others. A government of free people required a design that prevented control by one or even many interests, so that factions could be deterred from tyrannical rule. The design of American government ensured not only a pluralism of structural arrangements but also a pluralism of values, political orientations, and interests.

An inventory of governmental units shows how the complexity envisioned by James Madison has multiplied exponentially. In 1982, there were 82,341 governmental units in the United States, representing three levels of government and a variety of hybrids: one national government; fifty state governments; 3,041 counties; 16,734 townships; 19,076 cities and towns; 28,588 special districts, delivering services ranging from flood control and irrigation to fire protection to libraries and hospitals; and 14,581 school districts (Wright, 1988). The network of associations between and among units—that is, *intergovernmental relations*—defies simple or enduring characterizations, but it has been depicted variously by such metaphors as layer cake, marble cake, picket fence, and whiplash.

If inherent structural complexity were not challenging enough, the web of government now extends to thousands of nonprofit organizations that have been enlisted to deliver public services. In 1980, federal, state, and local support to the nonprofit sector totaled almost $50 billion (Salamon, 1987). On average, over 40 percent of all government spending for social services, employment, housing, health, and the arts went to nonprofit organizations. Although some observers have argued that the widespread use of third sector organizations reduces the performance potential of government, “administration by proxy” (Hood, 1976) appears to be preferable to what might exist in its absence—either massive government or vastly diminished services.

One further complicating factor emanates from the nature of the American political economy. Business exercises influence by virtue of many of its routine decisions—for example, price adjustments, plant openings, hirings, and layoffs. This influence extends beyond the bounds of simple economic transactions, because government relies on business performance and must facilitate that performance by its actions. Noting this privileged position of business, Lindblom (1977, p. 175) writes: “They appear as functionaries performing functions that government officials regard as indispensable.”

Complexity is a double-edged sword. It can invigorate the people called
on to manage it, and it helps to preserve a system of governance. But complexity can also exceed our capacity to respond and cope with it, thereby frustrating our noble aims. Mosher (1980, p. 542) has written: “Some scholars have extolled complexity in public administration and legislation; it is a challenge, it is fun. But it is at least possible that complexity may grow beyond the bounds of the most brilliant minds. I suspect that it already has.” If complexity represents both a challenge and a potentially insurmountable barrier to successful public action, then public administrators must be prepared to follow different strategic paths. One path would be to put the best minds to work on complex problems, facilitating their successful resolution. Another would be to design systems for collective action that overcome the impediments of complexity and permit human beings to triumph despite their individual inadequacies. Another path would be to recognize the inefficacy of intervention and refrain from establishing unrealizable goals. These difficult choices are integral parts of the challenge posed by complexity.

Behaving Ethically

Expectations for the ethical behavior of public officials originated with the founding of the Republic. The founders considered themselves people of good breeding, capable of exercising the duties thrust on them by the demands of their time (Mosher, 1968). Public administrators today, however, find themselves in a more ambiguous ethical milieu. As moral discourse becomes less popular, moral absolutes appear to be in decline. Waldo (1980, p. 112) writes: “The twentieth century has hardly been distinguished either by its observance of agreed moral codes or by its concentration on ethical inquiry. On the contrary, it has been distinguished by a ‘decay’ of traditional moral codes, a widespread feeling that morality is ‘relative’ if not utterly meaningless, and a disposition to regard ethical inquiry as frivolous, irrelevant.”

At the same time that ethical inquiry has become muddled, the consequences of administrative decisions have become far more consequential. Administrative determinations today cover the spectrum of our physical and social environments, from the cleanliness of our air to opportunities for organ transplants to the security of our neighborhoods.

At the heart of the ethical challenge for public administrators are two questions (Brown, 1986): For whom is the public administrator an agent? What are the justifications for individual conduct and institutional practices and modes of thought? To continue questioning, is the public administrator the servant of one group (that is, administrative superiors) or of several (including legislators and the sovereign public)? Should administrators act to maximize the positive consequences of public action, or are there categorical imperatives to which the administrator must attend? There are obviously no simple answers to these questions. From these quandaries, however, springs the challenge for public administrators to reflect seriously on the moral obligations of their social roles.
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Summary

Unlike the corruption and favoritism confronted by the fictional administrator of the Republic, Philip Dru, there is nothing fictional about the challenges faced by today's public administrator. All public administrators must learn to deal with the five challenges discussed in this chapter, which reflect the American system of administration and the technological, social, and international changes that currently engulf it. These challenges can both frustrate and exhilarate. Public administration has risen to the challenges that have confronted it in the past. We can hope it will continue to cope with future challenges successfully, because the quality of public and private life depends on their being met. The remainder of this handbook is devoted to exploring these challenges and providing public administrators with insights and tools for dealing with them.

References