Evaluating the Union-Management Relationship in Government

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Collective bargaining and public employee unionism now pose preeminent challenges in government at all levels. Public managers' and legislators' attentions are, at this stage of the development of public sector bargaining, cast around pragmatic concerns such as the legalization of collective bargaining and the administration of day-to-day union-management relations. An area of particular neglect, suggests Newland, is the relationship of collective bargaining to social change, including the accomplishment of general government goals and objectives.

This paper will present a conceptual framework which may be used to evaluate the union-management relationship in government. It will utilize the concepts of organizational effectiveness which have a direct bearing upon union-management relations: absenteeism and turnover, labor productivity, adaptability/flexibility, job satisfaction, commitment, and user satisfaction. Previous evaluative studies of the union-management relationship are first examined in order to demonstrate some of the inadequacies of alternative approaches. The conceptual rationale for using organizational effectiveness as the yardstick against which to evaluate the union-management relationship is explored. We conclude with a discussion of the utility of the newly developed framework for evaluating union-management relationships in government.

The importance of the impact of the union-management relationship on governmental effectiveness cannot be underestimated. Newland argues that "collective bargaining must serve as one of several vehicles for creative change... if it is to be compatible with future public interests." A variety of assessments indicate, however, that collective bargaining in government has been an instrument of partisan interests rather than a vehicle for creative change. As long as either public managers pit public employees against citizens or public employee unions pit the public against management, labor-management relations in government will have decidedly negative impacts on the parties, the public, and the political system. Methods are needed for re-integrating management, employee, and citizens interests. The evaluative framework we propose highlights the multiplicity of interests that must be balanced through the union-management relationship. It also identifies explicit criteria for which all the parties in public sector bargaining should be held accountable.

Approaches to Evaluating the Union-Management Relationship

Since both "union-management relationships" and "evaluation" have a variety of connotations, it is important to define how we use each of the terms. The union-management relationship is a "continuing institutional relationship between an employer entity and a labor organization concerned with the negotiation and administration of agreements covering joint understandings...". We have authored or coauthored a number of articles on public sector collective bargaining. His current research interests are local government innovation and the impact of the union-management relationship on governmental resource allocation and effectiveness.

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about wages or salaries, hours of work and other terms and conditions of employment." This definition is broad enough to encompass a variety of governmental forms (e.g., general local governments and special districts) and several types of labor organizations, including employee associations as well as unions. Evaluation "is the notion of judging merit; someone is examining and weighing a phenomenon against some explicit or implicit yardstick." Thus, our objective is to develop a means for judging the merit or quality of the union-management relationship against some explicit criteria.

A strong case may be built for the argument that union-management conflict in government, and particularly the strike, has indeed served some positive functions.

Some empirical studies have explored bargaining outcomes in local government—for example, wages, hours, and work stoppages—and Dotson has proposed a theory of equity for the public employment relationship. None of these studies have, however, advanced an explicit framework for evaluating the union-management relationship in government. Rather, the implicit perspectives which public administrators presently use to evaluate the quality of union-management relations rely heavily upon experience in the industrial sector. This transfer is not surprising given the private sector's relatively long experience with collective bargaining. The approaches of those private sector studies discussed below are indicative of the perspectives which public administration has thus far relied upon to evaluate union-management relations.

Early studies of the union-management relationship in industry placed primary emphasis on its immediate dysfunctions—strikes and lockouts. The relationship was evaluated in terms of the ability of the two parties to resolve conflicts of interest without resort to economic warfare. These studies were primarily descriptive in nature, largely limited to a narrow concern with strikes, and were based upon a number of uncritical assumptions about the elements that contribute to satisfactory labor relations.

Later studies distinguished between the outcomes of the union-management relationship (economic warfare, industrial peace, strikes, etc.) and the process by which such outcomes were achieved. Whyte evaluated the union-management relationship in terms of four basic concepts: interactions among the participants; symbols (words or objects that symbolize relations); activities of the participants; and sentiments (the way people feel about themselves and others). Derber, Chalmers, and Stagner developed a framework based upon three primary dimensions: union influence (the scope and depth of union participation); attitudes (i.e., the attitudes of both management and the union); and pressure (e.g., contract pressures, grievance pressure). The common thread which ran through these studies was an emphasis on the individual perspectives of the parties; the relationship was evaluated by the way in which it was independently perceived by the union and by management.

These evaluative frameworks embody several common themes. One theme is the emphasis on conflict (competition) and cooperation (harmony) and the assumption that healthy labor relations are somehow the result of maximizing the latter and minimizing the former. Deutsch and others suggest, however, that the negative connotations of conflict are unrealistically simplistic:

It has been long recognized that conflict is not inherently pathological or destructive. Its very pervasiveness suggests that it has many positive functions. It prevents stagnation, it stimulates interest and curiosity, it is a medium through which problems can be aired and solutions arrived at; it is the root of personal and social change. A strong case may be built for the argument that union-management conflict in government, and particularly the strike, has indeed served some positive functions. The use of the strike by public employees has frequently highlighted inequities in public employment, occasionally expanded important issues to the attention of the public, and recently catalyzed public backlash against employee benefits considered by some as too generous.

A second theme of these evaluative studies is that, while they generally distinguish between process and outcome, their emphasis is almost exclusively on process considerations. Little direct attention is accorded probably the most significant outcome of the union-management relationship—the extent to which the parties achieve their separate goals and take into account the goals of others. The almost exclusive emphasis on process leaves one to infer that, if union-management interactions appear to be accommodative, then some reasonable resolution of conflicts of interest must have been achieved.

The validity of the assumptions underlying this inference, however, is questionable within the institutional context of government. Studies of industrial collective bargaining employ a closed system perspective, relying upon assumptions about a competitive market setting and a bilateral relationship in order to evaluate the union-management relationship as an isolated entity. The quality of union-management interaction suffices as an evaluative criterion since it is assumed to be directly related to profitability and mutual survival; as long as the two parties survive it can be assumed that the interests of third parties are being served.

Assumptions about market competition and bilateralism are highly suspect in governmental contexts. Monopoly and multilateralism appear more appropriate for characterizing the context of public sector bargaining. Stanley writes of the differing contexts: "The private employer must stay in business and sell his goods and services in order to pay his employees. . . . Governments, on the other hand, have to stay in business, and their payrolls are met from taxes or fees imposed on the public." The collective bargaining process in government also frequently involves a multiplicity of parties and interests. The complexity of resolving conflicting employee, management, and citizen interests highlights the inadequacies of evaluat-
ing union-management relationships in government simply on the basis of whether they are predominately conflictual, accommodative, or cooperative.

The shortcomings of these private sector frameworks, in their own right and as models for the public sector, do not mean that alternative frameworks or criteria are unavailable for evaluating the union-management relationship in government. Harbison and Coleman suggest, for example, the "extent to which such relations promote the attainment of the commonly held goals of a free society, broadly defined as economic progress and equality, the enhancement of the freedom, dignity, and worth of the individual, and the strengthening of democratic political institutions." Thus the systems view is primarily concerned with successful performance of various types of activities regardless of the goals the organization pursues.

Neither of these perspectives is adequate by itself as a conceptual basis for evaluating the union-management relationship in government. The goal approach, even when organizational goals can be specified, is unable to provide a satisfactory means for assessing the extent to which the parties take into account the goals of others. On the other hand, the systems approach tends to ignore the need to measure the programmatic accomplishments of government organizations vis-a-vis the union-management relationship.

Mohr and Warren offer some ideas useful for integrating the two approaches described above. Discussing the organizational goal concept, Mohr distinguishes between transitive and reflexive goals:

A transitive goal is one whose referent is outside of or in the environment of the organization in question. A transitive goal is thus an intended impact of the organization upon its environment.... We may identify as the general reflexive goal of an organization that inducements will be sufficient to evoke adequate contributions from all members of the organizational coalition.

Warren suggests that an organization’s sphere of activity can be defined “in terms of an organization’s access to necessary resources,” including “not only those resources needed for task performance...but also those needed for maintenance of the organization itself.” Cross-classifying Mohr’s distinction between transitive and reflexive goals with Warren’s distinction between task accomplishment and system maintenance serves to identify four components of organizational effectiveness. These four components are displayed in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Components of Organizational Effectiveness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task Performance</th>
<th>System Maintenance</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transitive</td>
<td>Achieving intended environmental impacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflexive</td>
<td>Optimizing resource utilization and goal-directed activity</td>
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This conceptualization defines organizational effectiveness not only in terms of the conventional notion of environ-
Absenteeism and Turnover

Although measures of the four components of effectiveness can be used as yardsticks for evaluation, factors other than the union-management relationship independently influence the effectiveness of government organizations (e.g., the competence of management and the aggressiveness with which the government organization interacts with its environment). The effectiveness criteria must therefore be limited to concepts associated with the impacts of the interactions and decisions which occur under the umbrella of the union-management relationship.18 We employ two rules for selecting specific criteria:

1. That the set of measures used reflect all four of the components of organizational effectiveness.
2. That each measure have the potential to be significantly influenced by union-management interaction or by decisions covered under the collective agreement.

Using these criteria we have selected six concepts for evaluating the union-management relationship: absenteeism and turnover, labor productivity, adaptability/flexibility, job satisfaction, commitment, and user satisfaction. As a group these concepts have high face validity for measuring the extent to which the parties achieve their goals and take into account the goals of relevant others. Each of the six concepts is discussed briefly below.

Absenteism and Turnover

Absenteism represents the failure of organizational members to report for scheduled work. Turnover (separation) is the amount of change in organizational personnel. Absenteeism and turnover are likely to be related to a number of factors that vary with the quality of union-management decision-making: pay and promotions, supervisory relations, job content, and job autonomy and responsibility.20 The levels of absenteeism and turnover, in turn, influence the cost and quality of the services an organization provides. Macy and Mirvis demonstrate the significant costs associated with absenteeism and turnover because of the need to adapt manning requirements and to recruit and train new employees.21 Seashore, Indik and Georgopoulos indicate that absenteeism is important to the delivery of services, particularly those which operate under a highly coordinated, daily schedule such as refuse collection and urban mass transit, where any kind of absence may severely disrupt the work process.22

Labor Productivity

Labor productivity represents the efficiency of human inputs in the production and delivery of goods and services. It is likely to be influenced significantly by wage, benefit, and working condition decisions arrived at in collective bargaining negotiations and by the attitudes of members of both organizations developed through their continuous interaction. Since labor productivity is a ratio of labor costs to outputs, it provides an alternative to evaluating the union-management relationship merely in terms of absolute wage levels.

Adaptability/Flexibility

Adaptability refers to an organization's ability to solve problems and to react to changes in its environment. It reflects an organization's readiness to tackle unusual problems, initiate improvements in work methods and operations, and try out new ideas and suggestions. As a criterion for judging the quality of the union-management relationship, it measures the extent to which collaborative decision-making among the parties actually occurs.23

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction refers to an individual's affective orientation to his or her work role. It is a function of job characteristics such as pay, working conditions, interpersonal relations, responsibility, and recognition. The extent to which union-management decision making and interaction fulfills the goals of individual union members is likely to be reflected in an employee's job satisfaction. The level of job satisfaction is likely to be influenced both by the quality of negotiated settlements and by the ongoing actions of union and management in administering the collective agreement.

Commitment

Campbell defines commitment as "the strength of the predisposition of an individual to engage in goal-directed action or activity on the job." Individual commitment to organizational goals is likely to be influenced by both the adequacy of employee representation by their bargaining agent and the fairness with which employees perceive they are treated by management. Katzell and Yankelovitch indicate that the degree of individual commitment to organizational goals is also strongly associated with several of the other criterion measures suggested here, particularly productivity and job satisfaction.24

User Satisfaction

User satisfaction is an evaluative criterion grounded in the perceptions of the recipients of the organization's goods and services. The quality of user evaluations is likely to reflect user assessments of the cost and quality of goods or services, the scope and responsiveness of the services provided, and user reaction to contacts with organizational members. User evaluations are likely to vary with the quality of the union-management relationship because of its effect on the continuity of services, the cost or
quality of services, and the ability of the governmental unit to respond to public needs and demands.

Utility of the Evaluative Framework

These concepts have a variety of uses as a tool for evaluating the union-management relationship in government. First, the six concepts discussed above could be used as a means for comparing similar governmental organizations or organizational subunits. The use of a uniform evaluative framework would facilitate identification of factors conducive to constructive union-management relationships in government. More importantly, it would focus evaluation of the union-management relationship in government on its consequences for governmental performance rather than on the partisan evaluations of unions, management, legislators, or the public. Second, measures of each of the concepts can be used to continuously monitor the effects of the union-management decision-making and to re-focus negotiations on the solution of joint problems rather than the attainment of partisan interests. Third, since unit costs can be attached to measures such as labor productivity, turnover, and absenteeism, incentive plans could be developed from these measures which would make rewards contingent upon appropriate changes in the effectiveness indices. Finally, a less tangible benefit of such an evaluative framework might be its influence on the perspectives of the parties and outside observers. The public interest would be served if the parties involved in public sector union-management relations developed standards of reasonableness and used them in pursuing creative change through collective bargaining.

Notes

19. Even careful selection of measures is no guarantee that other intervening factors will not influence the criteria. It is not
necessary, however, to define a complex model of all causal relationships in order to conduct an evaluation. Hatry, et al., suggest that other influences on the criteria should be considered in the normal course of identifying the positive and negative impacts of a specific program or set of activities. See Harry Hatry, Richard Winnie, and Donald M. Fisk, *Practical Program Evaluation for State and Local Government Officials* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 1973).


23. We view adaptability as an integral part of what Walton and McKersie term integrative bargaining or joint problem-solving. See Walton and McKersie, *op. cit.*


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### Professionalism and Authority: Women in Public Service

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In the past decade considerable attention has focused on the role of women in the occupational sector. The *Public Administration Review* Symposium, "Women in Public Administration" provides a provocative backdrop for considering changing norms and organizational perspectives among women in the public sector. This writer is particularly intrigued with the thesis, advanced in the symposium, that the processes of objective sex stereotyping and subjective role socialization comprise the most serious obstacles to sexual equality in the public sector.²

Apropos of the latter process, much of the literature in the social and management sciences has focused on the effects of sexual role differentiation on the division of labor within large organizations. Women, it is posited, are located in lower organizational echelons because (1) they are more passive, dependent, and amenable to authority than men and (2) the female role conflict between family and career obligations often vitiates the latter. Essentially, the argument suggests that the social allocation and internal apprehension of attitudinal and behavioral norms serve as "psychic" structural barriers for women as they enter and participate in the occupational marketplace.

Accepting the argument, advanced quite convincingly in a number of studies, that managerial perceptions of sexual roles and capabilities have forestalled sexual equality,³ this author is interested in examining the issue of subjective role limitations. Do women public employees themselves internalize certain role characteristics and expectations which might tend to inhibit their access to higher managerial positions? Is the mid-level female administrator-professional less committed to occupational role requirements than men? Does the distaff public servant perceive the hierarchical authority structure in a different manner than her male counterpart?

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