The Effective Public Administrator

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Chapter 43
Handbook of Public Administration

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This concluding chapter seeks to summarize what we know about effective public administrators. How shall we describe the effective public administrator? What are his or her qualities and attributes? What behaviors are characteristic of effective public administrators? In answering these questions, I will attempt to synthesize insights shared throughout this Handbook.

Defining Effectiveness

Effectiveness is an elusive concept. It is one of those things we talk about, but never seem to be able to define or achieve to our satisfaction. I do not pretend to have solved either of these problems here, but it will be helpful to start out with a general idea of what is meant by effectiveness.

One of the first to write extensively about the effective administrator was Peter Drucker. In his book, The Effective Executive, Drucker (1967) equated effectiveness with the executive's job.

To be effective is the job of the executive. "To effect" and "to execute" are, after all, near-synonyms. Whether he [she] works in a business or in a hospital, in a government agency or in a labor union, in a university or in the army, the executive is, first of all, expected to get the right things done (p. 1).

Richard Boyatzis (1982) associates the concept of administrator effectiveness with job performance. He defines
effective job performance as attaining results through actions that satisfy certain constraints.

Effective performance of the job is the attainment of specific results (i.e., outcomes) required by the job through specific actions while maintaining or being consistent with policies, procedures, and conditions of the organizational environment (p. 12).

One of the nuances of Boyatzis' definition is that results are a function of the job incumbent's actions, not chance occurrences. His definition also takes note of the context within which an administrator's job is performed, that is, the organization and its environment.

Anderson, Newland and Stillman (1983), in The Effective Local Government Manager, echo elements from the definitions of both Boyatzis and Drucker. Effectiveness "involves doing the right things well--whatever the contingencies" (p. 9).

These definitions imply some of the ideas commonly associated with public administrator effectiveness. Effectiveness is "doing the right job," "doing the job well," "overcoming impediments," and "living within certain constraints." I am interested here in summarizing the determinants that contribute to these results, that is, to public administrator effectiveness. By determinants I mean any one of a number of different kinds of causal factors--skills, traits, self-image, and motives--which result in effective performance.
What Makes an Effective Administrator?

This handbook has touched upon many factors which influence a public administrator's effectiveness. Seven stand out: technical skill, human skill, conceptual skill, responsiveness to democratic institutions, networking ability, focus on results, including the moral consequences of one's actions, and balance.

Technical skill. An effective public administrator has command over the specialized activities that are assigned as part of an organizational role. One of the hallmarks of modern organizations and, by extension, modern public administration is the expansion of specialized activity. Administrator effectiveness necessitates, therefore, some capacity to perform specialized tasks. Technical skill implies a proficiency in a specific kind of activity, particularly one involving methods, procedures, or techniques (Katz, 1974).

Some contributors to the handbook have explicitly addressed the importance of technical skills for administrator effectiveness; others have recognized their importance implicitly. For example, technical skills are essential for the effective policy analyst who must be able to critically assess sophisticated quantitative analyses and, on occasion, conduct the analysis personally. As House and Shull noted in Chapter 17, the technical demands for policy analysis have expanded since the advent of personal computers, which require proficiency in manipulating pre-programmed analytic packages and testing a wide array of models and assumptions.
A government accountant must be proficient in different, but no less important, techniques and methods. Following Berne's discussion in Chapter 22, the accountant must, among other proficiencies, be able to read and interpret financial statements, report financial information so that non-experts can understand it, become familiar and comply with legal mandates for accounting information, and design and evaluate accounting systems that satisfy the multiple objectives of financial decision makers.

Technical skill is also an effectiveness requisite for public administrators who serve as legislative liaison, financial and budget analysts, trainers and management developers, compensation and equal employment specialists, labor negotiators, and systems analysts. Because technical skills are the most concrete aspect of administrator effectiveness and have held such a central role in public administration thought over the years (Kaufman, 1969), it is important to put them into perspective. Although technical skills are an effectiveness requisite in virtually every administrative position (see, for example, Lau, Newman and Broedling's 1980 study on Navy senior executives), their relative importance usually declines as a public administrator ascends an organization's hierarchy. By the same token, technical skills are never likely to be the only characteristic which discriminates between effective and ineffective performers at any level in an organization. The effective public administrator needs to possess other skills and attributes, which are discussed below.
Human skill. Dwight Waldo (1955) has characterized the essence of administration as cooperative human action. Cooperative activity involves human interaction. The effective public administrator must possess the human skills to integrate people into all types of cooperative activity.

Human skills are complex and difficult to easily summarize. At a minimum, they involve an awareness of self and how one's actions affect others, an orientation toward and sensitivity for others, perceptiveness regarding the motives and sensitivities of others, recognition of one's responsibility to the group, and genuineness in relations with others (Katz, 1974).

As the contents of this handbook illustrate, the situations in which a public administrator must employ these human skills are extensive. The situation probably most identified with human skills involves the problem of motivating subordinates to achieve high performance. Using their human skills, public administrators seek to develop identification with and commitment to organizational goals and to assure member satisfaction with the rewards and incentives the organization is able to offer.

In some cases, human skills must be applied to motivational issues involving clients, that is, to facilitating co-production processes. Although citizens may realize cost and quality benefits from taking an active role in the production process, the public administrator plays a pivotal role in energizing and channeling client support. For instance, volunteers can be excellent resources for particular types of public services, but their enthusiasm and energy must be harnessed and directed toward
organizational objectives or their commitment could potentially be more harmful than productive.

The importance of human skills for the public administrator reaches into the political environment as well. Relations with legislators, elected and appointed executives, and citizens are potential sources for confrontation unless the public administrator brings the appropriate orientation and skills to the situation. Perceptiveness and empathy, that is, being able to identify with the other party and understand their position, is a necessary starting point for constructive, non-confrontational relationships.

Reflecting about the situations in which human skills are important demonstrates the tenuousness of the public administrator’s position. Although government is the chief coercive institution in our society, it is obvious that much of what happens in government depends on cooperation rather than coercion. Public administrators, as agents, are, therefore, relatively helpless unless they can wield informal influence. Thus, public administrators need to develop their human skills to provide the glue to bind people together in cooperative action.

**Conceptual skill.** This skill involves the public administrator’s ability to see the big picture—conceiving how decisions, events, and people are linked together in time and space. Robert Katz (1974) suggests that conceptual skill involves recognizing how the functions of an organization are interdependent and visualizing the relationship of the organization to its broader context. In government this means
being able to visualize the relationship between one's own organizational activities and broader agency and governmental goals, to recognize the implications of action for many attentive groups and the general public, and to anticipate the consequences of action or inaction through time.

Like human and technical skills, the situations that require well developed conceptual skills are numerous. For example, the challenges discussed in Part I demand the application of considerable conceptual skill to understand their ramifications for administration and governance. Appropriate responses to growing global interdependence, the evolution of science and technology, and shifting social realities could not be fashioned without a broad view of how decisions, events, and people are linked together in time and space.

In a similar fashion, effective public policy making requires participants to visualize programs holistically over time. Conceptual skill is essential to the number and quality of policy options that can be defined for any public problem. Implementation of public programs requires public administrators to conceptualize the factors which will ultimately contribute to the success of a program and contingencies that will diminish its success. The ability to conceptualize a program in operational terms at an early stage must be complemented by an ability to conceptualize it in physical and human terms as well.

Each of the arenas discussed above illustrates the importance of conceptual skills for the effective public administrator. In a real sense, conceptual skills are to the
administrator what strategic capability is to the larger organization. They each help to unify and coordinate the administrative process in a chaotic environment.

**Responsiveness to democratic control.** The effective public administrator not only complies with the letter of the law, but strives to facilitate all aspects of democratic process—by promoting an informed citizenry, contributing to open debate of issues, and respecting the ultimate choices of citizens and their representatives. Carrying out the law is the first test of democratic responsiveness. As Phillip Cooper argued in Chapter 8, failure to carry out the law cannot be justified on the basis of the ends of administrative action because the administrator’s authority is derived from law. For the public administrator to violate the law is illegitimate and, therefore, undermines the foundations of constitutional democracy.

As Part II illustrated, legal systems are but one mechanism for encouraging democratic responsiveness by structuring the public administrator’s environment. Governance structures, organization design and strategic plans reinforce the importance of democratic values. The effective public administrator recognizes these structural imperatives and strives to use these mechanisms to further the goals of a democratic society. Even in relatively unique contexts, such as the types of public enterprises discussed by Rainey and Wechsler in Chapter 35, the effective public administrator is aware of and attempts to be responsive to democratic control.
While formal control systems create an environment for accountability, they do not assure that public administrators will respond to the needs and interests of citizens and their representatives. The public administrator who perceives and properly interprets environmental cues about popular control has probably also successfully internalized the values and ethical precepts of democratic governance. Among the normative perspectives internalized is what Goodsell in Chapter 40 called the multitude orientation, which directs the administrator’s attention to citizens and their interests. This is not the only guiding orientation, but it is a crucial consideration for responsiveness to democratic control. Among the related ethical precepts identified by Chandler in Chapter 42 are "affirm pluralist theory," "advocate social equity," "maintain constitutional order," and "serve the community."

Although accountability is generally discussed in process terms, responsiveness to democratic control is not solely procedural. Citizens expect quality services at a reasonable cost as part of their social contract with government. The ability of a democratic government to satisfy the more mundane and daily demands of its citizens is essential for it to maintain its legitimacy. The effective public administrator recognizes the linkage between routine operating responsibilities and the long-term viability of democratic governance.

Focus on results, including the moral impact of actions. Despite the ambiguities often inherent in their positions, effective public administrators have a keen interest in the
results of their activities. As stewards for scarce, communal resources, public administrators are obligated to achieve results.

The results orientation is rooted in the very beginnings of American public administration. Among the results that have historically attracted the most attention from public administrators are efficiency, effectiveness and equity. But the effective public administrator’s concern about results does not end with these three. He or she is interested in the moral dimension of action as well. Thus, the effective public administrator is cognizant of the ethical use of office. The effective public administrator is also aware of the consequences of institutional decisions and actively engaged in mitigating the undesirable consequences of administrative institutions.

Effective public administrators are interested not only in the obvious moral consequences of their actions, but the more subtle, less perceptible consequences as well. In deliberations about tax policy, for example, the effective public administrator recognizes that decisions about taxes are not neutral, but have important distributive, economic, and social consequences. It is the public administrator’s role to help focus public debate on these consequences of taxes as well as on their revenue capacity and collectability.

Capacity to work within diffuse, complex networks. Chapter 1 discussed the challenge of managing complexity, uncertainty and change. One by-product of this challenge is that effective public administrators must develop a capacity to operate within
diffuse and complex networks. The networks which public administrators must master have several facets. One is their human component. Public administrators must develop cooperative linkages with peers, subordinates, politicians, competitors, and constituents to be able to gather and get information vital for working effectively within the network. Another component of these networks is their structure—how to make sense of them conceptually.

A public administrator’s capacity to work within diffuse, complex networks is a function of several skills and behavioral orientations. One of the skills most essential is the public administrator’s ability to bridge competing cultures (Ring and Perry, 1985). This skill involves the ability to integrate competing viewpoints in decisions, a self-other orientation, open mindedness and low levels of dogmatism. These attributes permit a manager to adapt to situations that require the manager to change hats, look to a new constituency, and explain the "facts" in new circumstances.

Another skill is the public administrator’s ability to communicate, particularly within large organizations and across social cleavages. As James Garnett noted in Chapter 38, communication in the public sector is different because government is often situated in the middle of an information network. Within such a network, communications skills become essential tools for operating effectively.

**Balance.** Criticisms that public administrators are either "risk averse" or "over zealous" originate from peoples’ judgments
about imbalances in administrative decisions or actions. The effective public administrator has the capacity to identify tradeoffs, and, ultimately, to recognize the need for balance in most public decisions and action.

The contributors to this handbook provided many illustrations of how balance is important for effective public administration. For instance, in Chapter 18, Walter Williams reminded us of the "Goldilocks problem" encountered when implementing public programs. Any good thing can be taken too far. Advice such as "to plan ahead" needs to be moderated by an awareness that too much planning can bog down efforts at timely implementation.

The relationships that public administrators develop with others in their environment could precipitate serious problems if they do not recognize the need to balance the interests of superiors, legislators, citizens and clients. Balancing the interests of all environmental actors does not mean that the public administrator should cater to everyone's interest or should compromise principle. At the same time, the effective public administrator recognizes that bureaucratic rules and the directives of superiors should not automatically negate the entreaties of citizens, to whom the administrator is also obliged to be responsive.

Balance is also a consideration regarding standards for professional conduct. The value and ethical frameworks for public administrators are multi-dimensional. Actions taken by
the public administrator should reflect consideration of multidimensional frameworks.

Another respect in which balance is important for the effective public administrator is the fine line walked between broad purpose and daily routine. In Chapter 12, Douglas Eadie illustrated the value of thinking and planning strategically. But attention to strategy must be balanced against the importance of the types of day-to-day operations discussed in Part VII. Building a strategic capability should enhance operational responsibilities, but the effective public administrator recognizes the need for balance between these competing responsibilities.

Public Administration as a Profession

Public administration has long been synonymous with public service—sacrifice on behalf of others in pursuit of the common good. Throughout much of American history, the call to public service has been a powerful motivator, a noble activity worthy of the best of our society. For example, President Kennedy’s call to "ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country," led a generation of American’s best and brightest to seek public service careers. Commitment to public service is part of our civic heritage.

As we have come to learn, however, effective public institutions in modern society cannot be built on commitment alone. Successful public institutions must be built on a combination of competence and commitment. Public administration
scholars and practitioners have progressively developed the foundations for administrative competence. This handbook is the culmination of this evolutionary process. Although public administration will continue to evolve, it has arrived at professional status through a merger of commitment and competence.

Joining competence and commitment is a necessary formula for meeting the challenges confronting today's public administrator. As noted in chapter 1, the public administrator faces five challenges indicative of the American system of public administration and the technological, social and international developments which presently surround it. From the perspective of our governance system, the most basic of these challenges is maintaining order according to the letter and spirit of the American Constitution. Within their assigned roles, public administrators are challenged by the need to achieve technical competence. They must also learn to cope with public expectations in a pluralist, democratic polity. Considering the technological and organizational imperatives of modern life, the public administrator is challenged by the realities of managing complexity, uncertainty and change. The public administrator must also rise to the challenge of behaving ethically.

We have reached the juncture, symbolized by this handbook, at which the public administrator can step forward with confidence to meet these challenges. The effective public administrator possesses a range of skills and attributes, each important to the successful performance of assigned and implicit
responsibilities. These skills range from a grasp of the technical components of a job, to ability to work with others, to a vision of the big picture. The effective public administrator is also attuned to the letter and spirit of democratic governance, and works to facilitate processes and substantive outcomes supportive of democratic institutions. At the same time, the public administrator is attentive to achieving results, but is aware that they need to be defined more broadly than economical and efficient operation of the government. The configuration of public sector systems requires that most public administrators be capable of working within diffuse and complex networks. Finally, effective public administrators must become artful at balancing a variety of competing considerations, including values and ethical precepts.

Attaining the skills and attributes to be an effective public administrator is itself a formidable challenge. To become effective, the public administrator must aspire to two potentially conflicting personal attributes--specialized knowledge and an awareness of and sensitivity to common, shared values. But effective public administrators succeed in integrating these attributes because of their commitment to public service. Public administrators can take great pride from the past and future accomplishments of the public sector. It has been with their competence and commitment that these accomplishments have been crafted.
References


