

EMERGING ISSUES: What If Government Doesn't Trust Citizens?

COLUMNIST:
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Citizens don't trust government is a pervasive thesis that both motivates (“gotta fix that!”) and discourages (“why bother!?”) attention to citizen engagement by public sector professionals.

No doubt the thesis is correct. Considerable scholarship and professional hand-wringing are devoted to it.

Less widely acknowledged is another aspect of the picture: *governments don't trust citizens*.

Yes, let us agree that citizens have a responsibility to endeavor to be as informed as possible and to contribute reasonably and civilly to public discourse.

But, let's not change the subject and shift all the blame too quickly; let's talk about government people's contributions to the flawed relationship, even if just for a while. One advantage: it's more feasible for (willing) administrators and elected officials to alter their own attitudes and behaviors directly; they can affect citizens' attitudes and behaviors only indirectly. Still, it's not easy, and it will require re-thinking some conventional wisdoms.

Systematic and recurring “re-thinking” is a skill and obligation that deserves greater emphasis – alongside currently popular “how to's” – from scholars and practicing professionals. It should be highlighted, enabled and encouraged by those who supervise, educate, train and re-train public servants.

A good place to start is to look carefully at administrators' individual and institutional attitudes toward citizens.

A factor that forcefully shapes those attitudes is the claim that officials and administrators have expertise and knowledge that citizens don't. This claim is also correct, but the implications drawn from it may not be. Some expertise

and knowledge are the kind that long experience and/or graduate school provide; it's important but often it shouldn't be the most important criterion for decision-making. Other elements of the claimed expertise might merely be about the particular folkways, procedures and habits of each agency or unit of government. (“We've always done it this way” doesn't count as expertise.)

The expertise claim is not to be confused with “professionalism,” a behavioral matter that my dictionary says has to do with “character, spirit or methods.”

In a 2010 survey by the National League of Cities, large majorities of city elected officials and top administrators said that “citizens having the right information” is one of the most important elements in conducting successful citizen engagement. What, we can ask, is the “right” information? My read is that survey respondents were giving priority to the knowledge, values and experience that City Hall folks have as compared to the knowledge, values and experience that citizens have.

It seems a good guess that state and federal administrators are at least comparably inclined toward this view. (“I'm from the federal government and I'm here to help” long ago became a standard laugh line.)

This attitude might be called the “arrogance of experts.” This is not a quote from the Tea Party; it comes from people in East Baltimore's poorer communities, according to Clarence Stone's recent report on neighborhood politics there.

The difficulty and its consequences are not new; they pervade all levels of government. In urban affairs, community protests and strenuous critiques by Jane Jacobs and Martin Anderson spotlighted the blind and harmful overconfidence of urban renewal programs. Similarly, David Halberstam detailed the devastating

effects of expert advice by “the best and the brightest” on 1960s foreign policy.

In his 1948 classic, *The Administrative State*, Dwight Waldo discussed the weaknesses in public administration theory around this crucial expertise topic. “All of the conflicts and inconsistencies in the public administration movement meet at this point...”

Special and privileged expertise – a claim characteristic of all the professions – is, Waldo said, a “claim to power.” It's a claim to power to frame issues, power to establish the preferred criteria for decisions, power even to make choices that affect other people.

Waldo labeled the presenting question as “Who Should Rule?” At the time of his writing, he reported, democratic philosophy was being “re-thought” and democratic institutions were “in the throes of change” to accommodate the increasingly important concept and fact of “management.” “On the whole,” he concluded, “the record is unsatisfying;” answers to the presenting question were “shallow and spurious.”

More than three score years later, we are again in a “travail... of accommodation” on these matters. But the situation is now reversed: administrative philosophy now needs to be “re-thought” and administrative institutions are in the “throes of change” in order to accommodate democracy.

The “expertise” claim is at least partly rooted in the fundamental distinction between politics and administration. This distinction long has been at the heart of public sector professions like public administration, planning, and policy analysis. The tendency is to equate administrative expertise and “modernization” with “the public interest” and to equate “politics” with special interests, skullduggery, and lack of knowledge. On this description deciding

which of the two aspects of governance should dominate appears all too easy. But it's too often a set-up; it precludes further thought; and it does not serve any of us well.

The dichotomy and its difficulties are easier to describe than to solve. We face a paradox rather than a puzzle and thus there will not be a single solution. Instead, the paradox demands re-thinking, again and again, by practitioners and theorists alike. On the one hand, relevant expertise matters: when the water pipe in the street bursts or when the health insurance website goes awry, you, I and most people want somebody in charge who knows what she's doing. Nonetheless, the expertise posture becomes grandiose and insistently pervasive, and so it repeatedly needs to be reined in and – to change the metaphor – deflated.

Over the decades since Waldo's assessment, many public administration folks have given serious attention to this challenge.

A good example is in the July/August 2013 issue of *Public Administration Review*. It contains the first of a series of articles commemorating the 100th birthday of International City/County Management Association. Nalbandian, O'Neill, Wilkes, and Kaufman valiantly and thoughtfully propose ways that city managers might over-ride the dichotomy and step into the “gap between political acceptability and administrative sustainability.” The authors deserve accolades for their effort

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stress, better customer satisfaction and ultimately results. The cost of not addressing engagement is tremendous. A 2013 Gallup report showed that 70 percent of workers are not engaged or actively disengaged, placing the annual estimated loss in U.S. business productivity at \$450-\$550 billion.

With so many models to improve engagement, which is the best one? Unfortunately, there is no one model for optimizing engagement because not all individuals or organizations are alike.

The 12 Currencies of Engagement

People are like nations—that is, they will accept some currencies, but not others. Even so, some currencies are universally accepted. Examining a cross section of the most popular and researched models shows 12 factors most consistently reported to correlate highly with engagement:

1. Engaged leaders and managers and an organizational culture that is nurtured at the top levels.
2. Trusted leadership developed by honoring commitments and doing what is right.
3. Timely, honest and consistent two-way communication.
4. Amiable relationships with immediate supervisors.
5. Respectful, collegial relationships with coworkers who do great work.
6. Fairness in compensation, workload and negotiations.
7. Pride in an organization's mission, products or accomplishments.
8. Appropriate and challenging opportunities for learning and career growth.
9. Rewards or recognition for achievements, however small.
10. Ability to influence decisions and have some control over the way one's work is done, scheduled and managed.
11. Flexibility in work location or methods, among others.
12. Accommodation of personal needs.

This list reflects the most powerful currencies for inspiring engagement. But how do you know which currency or combination of currencies will be most effective? By knowing your audience.

Moving from Gold to Platinum

When it comes to culture and engagement, most thinking stems from the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." This is a good start, but there is a better way. Leaders must strive for the Platinum Rule: "Do unto others as they would like done unto them." In other words, do not assume others want what you want. Treat them the way they prefer to be treated.

In applying the Platinum Rule, we need to embrace the fact that engagement is personal, must be customized and is an ongoing, iterative process highly influenced by fluid dynamics between leaders and followers. This leaves many leaders wondering if it is possible, or realistic, to achieve it. The answer is yes, if leaders prioritize and invest time in relationships and building leadership capabilities.

To build leadership capabilities, consider using Emotional Intelligence as the foundation. Leaders who understand themselves and regulate their own behavior generally are more attuned to what is happening with their people. Ultimately, the leader's ability to consistently deliver the right currency at the right time determines his or her effectiveness at engagement.

The Platinum Rule begins with active listening. Effective leaders notice that their people constantly communicate their desires through words and deeds. They become attuned to the currencies used by their direct reports and quickly gain insight into how best to engage and keep them motivated. This is where the Golden Rule provides a useful signpost; they probably behave toward others the way they wish to be treated. This method of assessing needs and wants also works up and across the chain of command.

Another approach, so simple that it is often overlooked, is asking people directly. In 2005, Sirota coined the term, "stay interview" to describe an ongoing, informal dialogue where ones seek feedback on the reasons why employees stay, matters that are going well or not and one's performance as a leader. The goal

is to stay connected. The 12 engagement factors can help, but it is essential to recognize that leadership behaviors are meant to drive and shape organizational culture.

Everything a leader does and says, consciously or unconsciously, models what is acceptable or unacceptable. It influences the choices one makes regarding strategy, structure, policies, procedures and their hiring and reward decisions. In short, employee engagement is not a one-shot effort to check off. It is a concerted effort to develop a partnering culture. Once you have learned what currency people want, you need to identify how frequently they want it.

An investment in your people will not go unrewarded. If nothing else, time spent getting to know them will communicate one's genuine interest in their satisfaction, which itself goes a long way toward developing engagement.

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to re-open this discussion.

As a framework for continued thinking, however, the article is flawed: it closes rather than opens the topic. Administrators are described as working "in the realm of data and analysis with sober concerns for administrative sustainability." "Political acceptability," on the other hand, is narrowed to "politics of identity," which is less substantive, "often emotional" and characterized by "the unschooled mind." Analysis of the relation of these two aspects of governance is pre-judged by these lop-sided descriptions. And they make it hard to see why "connecting the two is a prerequisite for effective governance."

From all of this, important questions emerge for reflective practitioners and scholars. For example, how can administration and politics both be described positively and fairly? Can they be reconciled or are they mutually exclusive? Or, do they permeate one another in both the theory and practice of governance, and thus the dichotomy should be abandoned and another approach developed?

Public administrators will do well to re-think these and other ideas that support their own and their institutions' contributions to unsatisfactory citizen/government relationships.

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In the face of growing anti-government sentiment, as a public servant how do you respond to criticism that the government is an inefficient bureaucracy?

I would say that we live in tough economic times and that everything that is funded is going to be a challenge; but do not give in to negative thinking about a government and country that I am so proud to serve. I am an American and love it. I am proud to serve my country and can do it at a low cost. Many of whom I serve are soldiers while others are ordinary people; but we all have to give in order to have something to show for our country and to make it better. The government does not control our economy rather it is the citizens and we need to be better stewards of America.

What is your advice to young professionals entering the public service?

Public service is the most rewarding work. I am an educator who runs a public charity and although it is not huge in monetary rewards, my heart and spirit are full. We have to stop defining success as a number, rather as a state of being and the quality we bring to the lives of others as well as ourselves.