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TURNING THE PUBLIC WHEEL:
SOME ISSUES IN PUBLIC PERSONNEL ADMINISTRATION

Government is often described as a giant wheel turning out goods and services for the public. In the early decades of serving the public, the wheel of government was simple, as were the needs of the people it served, and life in general. Today, the giant wheel of government is, in reality, a complex system of cogwheels meshed one with the other in a growing interdependent wheelworks.

People generate the power for this public system. Public employees supply the energy, knowledge, and skills that create the pull from within; and pressure groups and the user public exert the force from without to keep the giant wheelworks turning. These two sources of energy, the people within and the pressure groups without, frequently do not pull and push in the same direction. At times there are conflicts in the goals, needs and expectations of these groups that can create stress in the system, and on occasion, almost immobilize it.

Friction in the Wheelworks.

Increasingly, pressure is put on government to develop new programs or to enlarge existing ones, as well as to carry out a growing variety of functions. This pressure comes from both those in government and those served by government. Yet at the same time, the cry that "government is too big" reverberates throughout all levels of the public as well as the private sector. The public demands government to provide access to information, but expects that its right to privacy be protected. Public employees insist upon their rights and privileges, while managers struggle to maintain management prerogatives. And both raise serious concerns about the ability of government to efficiently and effectively carry out its responsibilities and programs. Lack of confidence in government has become a major issue; and daily we read headlines that reflect on the integrity and ethics of government leaders and public administrators. The turbulence that results from conflicting views about these issues impedes the smooth turning of the public wheel.

The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the current issues in public personnel administration. In this discussion, public personnel administration is viewed as a "process-system" which is an integral part of the broader management "process-system". French describes personnel management as a dynamic sub-aspect of the total management process, and that it is an integral part of all subdivisions of an organization.¹

It is suggested that values are at the core of the management

1. French, Wendell, *The Personnel Management Process: Human Resources Administration* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1970), p. 33. French uses the process-system approach as a functional means to study personnel management.

"Process-system" and consequently are the motivators in public personnel administration focus on two major questions; (1) who are the people that should turn the public wheel, and (2) in what manner must it be turned. That is, who shall work for the public and how must they fulfill their responsibilities to the public.

A Process-System in Continuous Transition.

Public personnel issues predate the establishment of the nation itself. And, they have historically clustered around the two questions of, who shall work for the public and how must they fulfill their responsibilities to the public. Since the beginning, abuses and misuses have plagued the process-system of public personnel administration and its efforts to serve the public. The development of public personnel administration may be viewed as a continuous effort to remove abuses and misuses from the process-system by improving the quality of the people in it and the manner in which they function.

While the basic issues and concerns have not changed fundamentally, some of the underlying values² upon which these issues and concerns rest are in constant transition. This transition is more a function of reinterpretation, than it is of discarding the old and adoption of new values. An example of this is the fact that the entire personnel process-system rests on the basic American value of democratic government. That is, that government must be "of the people, for the people, and by the people". At various times "the people" has meant male property owners, above a specific age, male citizens eligible to vote, males in general, and finally, males and females. But today, we tend to talk about "all the people." Thus, the acceptance of the value of "all the people" has had the effect of placing value on a representative public service.³ Similarly, the issue of who shall work for the public has undergone transition from "to the victor goes the spoils" to the current value placed in the "best qualified" for a particular position.

The growing importance placed on efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity has led to greater emphasis in the competency of public

2. Kluckhohn, Clyde, "Value and Value-Orientations in the Theory of Action," *Toward a General Theory of Action*. Edited by Talcott Parsons and Edward Shils (New York: Harper and Row, 1962). Kluckhohn describes a value as a conception, explicit or implicit distinction of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection of available modes, means, and ends of action. Thus, values may be seen as motivators, action oriented and interrelated.
 Bonner, Hubert, "Scientific Assumptions and Human Values," *Values in an Age of Confrontation*. Edited by Jeremiah Canning (Columbus, Ohio: Charles Merrill Co., 1970). Bonner points out that every society has a system of values — a set of interrelated ideas, concepts and practices to which strong sentiments are attached. The work value as used here has the common sense meaning of something important to the individual or group concerned. A value, then, is anything — idea, belief, practice, thing — that is important to people for any reason.

employees. Certainly the Pendleton Act of 1883 establishing the Civil Service Commission was the major step in this direction. This act is the codification of a number of important attitude and value changes related to the issue of who shall work for the public. The establishment of the merit principle clearly reflects a change in the value placed by society on the types of individuals who may be employed by the public. Thus, we see that the values at the foundation of public personnel administration are in transition. And, because it is an adaptive process-system, the personnel practices that develop from efforts to resolve these issues grow out of this transitory nature of values. Thus, the practices are themselves in continuous transition.

This examination of current public personnel issues for their value foundation is made to gain a better understanding of these values and their interrelationships. This type of analysis can assist in the development of more effective resolutions and solutions to the issues. It is beyond the boundaries of this discussion to make judgments about the values themselves, but merely to identify some of them. This paper does not suggest specific solutions and resolutions, but indicates the value conflicts underlying these issues. It is argued that values are the foundation of major issues in public personnel administration and hold the keys to the development of more effective resolutions of these issues.

Some Issues in Who Shall Turn the Public Wheel.

The question of who shall work for the public will be given greater attention than how public employees fulfill their responsibilities to the public. The rationale behind this choice is based on the fact that the personnel process-system spends a greater proportion of its time and resources in addressing the former rather than the latter issues. How public employees fulfill their responsibilities to the public generally falls in the realm of the management of human resources, rather than the more limited scope of public personnel administration. However, each is closely related to the other and both are essential to an effective management system.

The issue of who gains entrance in the public service has been, throughout the history of public administration, one of the most pervasive issues. The merit system, designed to resolve many issues, created a set of new issues. These issues cluster around the question of, "Is there merit in the merit system?" The merit principle grows out of the value that one must be qualified for public employment. The issue is complicated by the fact that there is no clear agreement on the definitions of merit, merit system, merit principle, merit concept, or the civil service system. Consequently, major problems grow out of the confusion resulting from the use of these terms. There are at least two major conflicting meanings — merit as reward for being deserving, and the other, merit as reward for

3. Veteran's preference and ranking by test scores are EXAMPLES OF REWARDS GIVEN BY THE CIVIL SERVICE SYSTEM TO DESERVING INDIVIDUALS.

being the best.⁴ The values that come into conflict are the worth placed on a representative public service. The issue becomes, "Can the civil service system be competitive while at the same time achieve a more representative work force?" Mosher, in discussing democracy and the public service, indicated the importance of a representative public service. He states that, "A public service, and more specifically the leadership personnel of a public service, which is broadly representative of all categories of the population in these respects may be thought of as satisfying Lincoln's prescription of government "by the people" in a limited sense.⁵ Long indicates that, "The non-elected civil service may be both more representative of the country and more democratic in its composition than the Congress."⁶ Both Mosher and Long see the degree of representativeness in the public service to be inadequate to fulfill the ideal in democratic principles but place great value on it. Mosher sees representativeness as essential to his argument for more participatory management.

Part of this concept of a representative government develops the issues of, should the government be an equal employment opportunity employer and an employer of last resort. These issues continue to be raised despite the fact that executive orders, legislation, and court decisions have given legal support to these principles. The fact that a segment of the public and some individuals in government continue to question the soundness of public employees to participate in the management process. This issue of participatory management versus management prerogatives exemplifies the clash of expectations and the values that support these expectations. The values basic to a democratic society are clearly seen in public employees efforts to fulfill the expectations of government for, by, and of the people. That is, public employees believe that they must be self determining in reaching goals and objectives that greatly affect their lives. It comes as no surprise that public employees place value on being able to set their work hours (flex-time) and make other decisions about the quality of the work environment as well as the quality of the work they perform.

Thus, how public employees fulfill their responsibilities to the public is directly related to the values they hold and the expectations they have for fulfilling their own goals and aspirations. Values are the key to understanding work incentive, reward systems, motivation and employee

4. The concept of the best qualified has relative application in civil service systems utilizing the "rule of three". The best qualified become the three top candidates who are eligible for selection rather than the appointment of the individual with the highest composite qualifying score.

5. Mosher, Frederick C., *Democracy and the Public Service* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 13.

6. Long, Morton E., *The Polity* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1962), p. 93.

these principles tends to indicate that the values upon which these principles rest are not shared generally enough to reduce or resolve them as issues. Yet, both the concepts of equal employment opportunity and government as an employer of last resort are essential to accomplishing representativeness in the public service. And both are related to the principles of "merit as deserving" and "merit as being the best."

The values of merit as deserving, merit as being the best, and the merit of representativeness may be seen as values in concert with one another, rather than creating dissonance. It is suggested that the merit system is flexible and capable of establishing a reasonable balance that recognizes the merits of each and the need for all three.

The more specific issues related to entrance into the public service such as veteran's preference, culture bias tests, and position classifications, and the values underlying each of these, are not discussed in detail. They are identified as issues and concerns in public personnel administration. And, it is pointed out that the inherent values of each are in transition. A more detailed examination of the values found in each would be useful in developing resolutions of conflicts around these issues.

Issues related to who shall work for the public are not limited to the access of public employees to employment. Some of these issues are concerned not just with the entry process but also with the retention of public employees. A notable example that clearly illustrates values in transition is the matter of suitability standards for conduct by public employees. The impact of the Griggs vs. Duke Power Company decision (1971) goes beyond the requirement of job relatedness tests for entrance into the public service, but also applies the principle of job relatedness as protection of public employees against dismissal.

The new U. S. Civil Service Commission guidelines for judging standards of suitable conduct of public employees are based on the concept that, "Each case must be decided on its own merits and that all decisions regarding the fitness of applicants or employees should be made in a manner that will promote the efficiency of the service while assuring fair, impartial, and equitable treatment of individuals." These guidelines clearly point out that the behavior must affect the ability of the person to function in the job or the agency's ability to discharge its responsibilities. The courts have established the test of job relatedness as a connection between the individual's conduct and the efficiency of the service.

A number of significant value changes are reflected in these new guidelines. A notable example is the requirement to apply the same standard in evaluating sexual conduct, whether heterosexual or homosexual. An examination of the value changes in the broader society is very helpful in understanding the changes that are represented by this code of suitable conduct. It is contended that by studying values in transition in the society in general, one is better able to predict changes that will occur in public personnel practices. Check the values found in the youth movements of the late 1960's foreshadowed some of the value

changes taking place among some public employees as this age group entered the public service. In addition, value changes in the broader culture give impetus and support for these changes in the public service. Thus, the resolution of conflicts in public personnel administration may be accomplished by a greater understanding of the values reflected by the issues being raised in the "process-system."

This examination of some of the issues related to who shall work for the public discussed the values foundation of the merit system. It identified the conflicting meanings found in the merit principle and the values reflected in the concepts of merit as reward for being deserving and reward for being the best. The relationship of these two concepts with the concept of representative government was indicated, and it was suggested that these concepts need not be in conflict. It was pointed out that some of the issues concerning the entry into public service also apply to the retention of public employees. These issues related to the retention of public employees have an effect on how public employees fulfill their responsibilities, thus also address the second major question of this paper.

Some Issues Related to How Public Employees Fulfill Their Responsibilities to the Public.

Historically, our society has placed value of the bureaucracy being responsive to the needs of the public. As a result, those working for the government were considered to be public servants. However, as a result of their struggle for rights and privileges, those who work for the government now consider themselves to be public employees. The concepts of the public servant versus the public employee indicate some value changes that affect not only the definition of the role of those who work for government, but may also affect their behavior in fulfilling their responsibilities to the public. Public employees attitudes and beliefs that they, too, are a part of the public and have the right of the government to respond to their needs within, as well as, outside the organization. These attitudes may result in conflicts between the general user of services "public", and the internal producer of public services — the public employee. Serious public concerns are articulated in the question, "Have we gone too far in our efforts to meet the needs and expectations of public employees at the expense of fulfilling the needs of the public?"

The human relations and behavioral movements in the field of public personnel administration have had a profound impact on public employee expectations. Some examples of these expectations are the right to receive job satisfaction and recognition from their work, the protection of their civil rights and their right to privacy, their access to public information, their right to organize in unions and to collectively bargain, and their right to participate in the political process that is currently illegal under the Hatch Act.

Another major issue related to how public employees fulfill their responsibilities to the public is greatly influenced by the expectations of

identification with the goals of the organization and the needs of the public.

Keeping the Wheel Turning.

In a dynamic society, constant change will require us to search for the basic foundation of issues and the changes they stimulate. It has been argued that values are the basic building blocks and through an analysis and understanding of underlying values, we can predict and resolve issues in public personnel administration. Values are not the sole unit in the foundation; however, they have significant importance and should be given very careful consideration in attempting to keep the giant wheel of government smoothly operating.

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