

Improved Public Administration: Expect the Best

Dr. William Shendow

*Shenandoah University
1460 University Drive
Winchester, VA 22601 USA*

Over the years, I have observed that in sports it is not always the most talented or skilled which is successful, but rather it is often the team or individual others expect to win. It appears as if the expectations of others is a frequent determinant of success. As a professor of public administration, that conclusion has prompted me to consider whether this observation has ramifications for improving public administration.

Keywords: public administration, societal expectations, leadership.

Introduction

Why do some organizations succeed and others fail? An answer to this question has long been a subject of inquiry. Over the past twenty years, there appears to be a growing consensus in management literature that a positive organizational culture, replete with values which support the organization's mission, is a common denominator in successful organizations. This was the conclusion reached in 1982 classic management book entitled, *In Search of Excellence*. The book's authors, Tom Peters and Robert H. Waterman, found in a comprehensive survey that without exception, the dominance and coherence of a positive culture based on values which supported the organization's mission, proved to be the defining quality of excellent organizations.¹ Terrence E. Deal and Alan A. Kennedy's book *Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life*, written in the same year, reached a similar conclusion. They concluded that "a strong positive culture has always been the driving force behind success in organizations."² This message was repeated as recently as March 2001 in a *Political Administration Times* article titled, *Phoenix is a Benchmark of Excellence*. In the article, Phoenix city manager, Frank Fairbanks attributed his city's recognition as the "Best Run City" to a good organizational culture which "cherishes public service values."³

While the importance of a positive internal culture to organizational success is well documented, what is as equally important to organizational effectiveness in the public sector, but not nearly as well documented, is the external, societal culture of the

host jurisdiction...the city, state or nation served by government. In a sense, it can be said that all public organizations deal with two cultures, their unique internal culture and the external culture of the community they serve. While an analysis of internal culture is extremely important, public sector organizations cannot be thoroughly understood or evaluated outside of the culture of the host jurisdiction. **A community's attitude, or more specifically, expectations of governmental institutions is the measure of effectiveness by which they are judged.**

Societal expectations of public administration serve to determine the approach and resources which are applied to a given problem and establish the parameters of activities in which a public official carries out his or her administrative duties in addressing the problem. For example, if corruption is rife in the community served, it is often times societal expectations that set the limits and direction of how this problem is addressed. If it is part of society's culture to expect corruption, it will likely occur and continue to occur. If, on the other hand, a society expects honesty and a high level of professionalism from its public officials, the citizens of that society more often than not are the beneficiary of their own expectations. It is unlikely that organizational performance will significantly surpass the expectations of those served. Low expectations lead to less than the best administration. High expectations can evoke better administration, particularly when it is coupled with organizational development activities which build expectations of improved organizational performance within the organization.

Societal Expectations Vary

Studies reveal that societal expectations of public administration vary, not only from nation to nation, state to state, but even locality to locality. Much of the difference can be traced to the society's historical experience and values. The French heavily bureaucratic form of public administration and the accompanying values of centralization, chain of command and division of labor, was largely developed by Napoleon to govern a growing empire.⁴ The Japanese organizational culture can be traced to the combined historical values of cooperation to be found in the rice fields and the tradition of service taken from the samurai warriors. America's societal culture reflects the ethic of competitive individualism which developed on the frontier as the nation expanded west. This social value helped produce an internal organizational culture which valued winning and rewarding organizational behavior which produced winners.⁵

A society's historical experience and values help establish that which is considered normal. It is against this standard of normalcy that expectations of public administration are established. Normal public administration behavior is behavior which falls within the boundaries of societal expectations. What is normal bureaucratic behavior in one society, is not necessarily normal in another society. Therefore, expectations of the bureaucracy vary a good deal from one society to another. Expectations of the bureaucracy in a democracy are quite different from societal expectations in more authoritarian or totalitarian states. Likewise, developing democracies have different expectations than those countries which have had a greater democratic experience. Generally, expectations of public administration are quite low in developing democracies. Their expectations generally support less than the best public administration.⁶

Even among those societies which have a democratic tradition, there are varying levels of societal expectations of the bureaucracy. The distinguishing variable among democratic societies appears to be the level of trust of the bureaucracy by the populous. Studies of societies such as the United States, United Kingdom or Scandinavia where there is a relatively high level of trust in government, reveal a corresponding higher level of expectation of the bureaucracy. On the other hand, in democratic societies such as Italy and Spain with a relatively low level of trust in government, there is a corresponding low level of bureaucratic expectation among the populous.⁷

Changing Societal Expectations Requires Leadership

With societies varying so greatly in their historical experience, values, democratic tradition and levels of trust, it is not surprising that there is no single societal model which if adopted would insure heightened expectations. Even if there was such a model, the culture of one society is not transferable to another. Such attempts have only resulted in frustration, friction, confusion and little change. While society's unique culture is not easily changed, it can be understood and used to improve bureaucratic performance through heightened societal expectations. To accomplish this requires...leadership⁸.

Changing the cycle of low societal expectations is difficult. It demands leadership of the first order. For public administration it requires a leader (mayor, governor, or president) who has credibility and a high level of public trust. It is also essential that the leader understand the external, cultural environment of the community served and the internal administrative culture of the public organization.⁹ It further requires someone with the vision, a vision of improved public administration who can effectively articulate that vision in a way that raises societal expectations. Finally, and most importantly, raising and maintaining societal expectations requires an action-oriented leader who is both supportive and demanding of administration. Raising societal expectations will be meaningless unless administrators are motivated to deliver services in keeping with expectations. Some visible signs of improved administration have to be forthcoming if expectations are to remain high.

To effect such a change within the organization, and provide evidence of improved administration, requires a leader who understands the relationship of both organizational efficacy expectations and organizational outcome expectations to improved performance. Expectancy theory, which is most often associated with studies of motivational leadership, provides a useful framework for such an understanding. It informs us that efficacy expectations are shared expectations of organizational members that they have the capacity to produce desired outcomes. Outcome expectancy is the shared belief that a given behavior will lead to certain outcomes. If the leader is able to raise both efficacy expectations and outcome expectations as part of the culture of the organization, expectancy theory maintains that the chance of improved performance is greatly enhanced.

Harrison and McIntosh in their article, "Using Social Learning Theory to Manage Organizational Performance", which appeared in the spring 1992

edition of the Journal of Managerial Issues provides an insight into those tactics available to leaders to raise organizational efficacy and outcome expectations. They group these tactics into four categories: social environment; symbolic communication; information influence, interpretation and dissemination; and, performance accomplishments. Taken together, these tactics promote the use of “a much broader communication style cloaked in the leaders interpretation of events and actions and demonstrated in conspicuous symbolic ways.” The strategic objective of this approach is to maintain a pattern of successes. It’s value, according to Harrison and McIntosh, rests on the argument that high efficiency and outcome expectations, once established, will lead to stronger individual efforts and

consequently improved performance. Improved performance, in turn, can be used to reinforce the expectations. This bootstrapping effect eventually strengthens shared expectations to the point where they are resistant to organization setbacks¹⁰.

Expect the Best Examples

The notion that expecting the best leads to the improved administration has a history in the United States. In the 20th century there were at least three classic examples when our nation’s leaders evoked the best from the bureaucracy by raising expectations within and outside of government. At the turn of the century, Teddy Roosevelt built expectations of constructing a canal in Central America linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Similarly, FDR did it with his fireside chats about combating the Great Depression and overcoming the Fascist threat to Democracy. Finally, in 1961, before a joint session of Congress, John F. Kennedy raised expectations by pledging that within ten years the U.S. would put a man on the moon and bring him safely home.

President Bush’s most recent proposal to create a Department of Homeland Security to combat terrorism could prove to be the first test in the 21st century of the thesis that building expectations can evoke improved administration. The President’s address to the nation was a classic attempt to raise expectations both inside and outside of government. In his address to the Nation, the President heightened societal expectations that the initiative would result in a safer, more secure America. He told the nation that his proposed reorganization which amounts to the largest restructuring of federal agencies since 1947, would “deal more effectively with the new threats of the 21st century.” He built expectations of those inside government that, “this reorganization will give the good people of our government their best oppor-

tunity to succeed.” With this statement, President Bush broke ranks with some of his predecessors who had belittled governments capacity to solve problems.¹¹ Instead, in very symbolic language he spoke glowingly of government agencies and the capacity of employees in these agencies to make the homeland security initiative work. In short, the president’s message to the general citizenry in the external culture was to expect the best. To those in government, the internal culture, the message was clear. The President expected the best. Only time will tell whether President Bush’s homeland security initiative will be seen as a successful example of the use of expectancy theory to improve performance. It is clear, however, that by raising expectations, President Bush has created an atmosphere which supports the prospect of improved public administration.

Conclusion

Expectancy theory is not new. Although there have been a number of theories under the rubric of expectancy theory, its roots can be traced to Victor Vroom’s 1964 work on motivation.¹² It is most commonly found in organizational behavior and leadership literature dealing with individual and organizational motivation. **The adaptation of this theory to societal levels of analyses is used in this paper to provide a useful framework for understanding how heightened organizational and societal expectation can be used to improve public administration.** While there is the chance for negative consequences when too much is expected, the potential for improved public administration resulting from expecting the best, more than offsets any chance for harm.

When all things are considered, raising the collective expectations of society and public organizations is a good place to start for the leader who is committed to ending the malaise of administrative mediocrity and beginning a process leading to improved public administration.

Notes

1. Peters, Thomas J. and Waterman, Robert H. 1982. *In Search of Excellence* New York: Warner Books
2. Deal, Terrence E. and Kennedy, Allen A. 1982. *Corporate Cultures*, New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co. Inc.
3. PA Times (Washington), March 2001.
4. Wilson, Frank L. 1996. *Concepts and Issues in Comparative Politics*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall
5. Morgan, Gareth 1986. *Images of Organization*. London: Sage Publications
6. Bozeman, Barry 2000. *Bureaucracy and Red Tape*.

- Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall
7. Peters, B. Guy 1989. *The Politics of Bureaucracy*. (3rd ed). New York and London: Longman
 8. Noted behaviorist Edgar Schien maintained that “the only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture and that the unique talent of leaders is their ability to work with culture.” Schein, Edgar H. 1985. *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass
 9. Rainey, Hal G. 1991. “Understanding and Managing Public Organizations.” San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers
 10. Harrison, Jr. Richard and McIntosh, Paul 1992. “Using Social Learning Theory to Manage Organizational Performances.” *Journal of Managerial Issues* Vol. IV No. 1. Spring 1992, 98-103.
 11. Ronald Reagan asserted that “government is not the solution to our problem. government is the problem”. Shafritz, Jay M. and Russell, E.W. 2002. *Introducing Public Administration* (3rd ed.) New York Addison Wesley-Longman, Inc.
 12. Vroom, Victor 1964. *Work and Motivation*. New York: Jon Wiley and Sons

William Shendow

Patobulintas viešasis administravimas: tikėkis geriausio

Santrauka

Straipsnyje analizuojama lūkesčių teorija. Jos ištakų ieškoma Victor Vroomo 1964 metų darbe apie motyvaciją. Nors individų ir organizacijų motyvacija išsamiai tiriama organizacijų elgsenos ir lyderystės literatūroje, šiame straipsnyje motyvacijos teorija, adaptuota socialinių lygmenų analizei, yra naudojama kaip karkasas siekiant suprasti, kaip padidėję organizacijų ir visuomenės lūkesčiai gali būti pritaikyti tobulinant viešąjį administravimą. Visada išlieka negatyvių pasekmių tikimybė, kai tikimasi per daug, tačiau potencialas viešojo administravimo tobulinimui, kai tikimasi geriausio rezultato, daug kartų pranoksta potencialią žalą.

Padidėję visuomenės ir viešųjų organizacijų lūkesčiai straipsnyje vertinami kaip lyderio galimybė pradėti tobulinti viešąjį administravimą.

William Shendow – Vyriausybės ir viešosios politikos Marsh instituto direktorius.

Telefonas +1 (540) 6654696.

Elektroninis paštas wshendow@su.edu

Straipsnis įteiktas 2002 m. rugsėjo mėn.; recenzuotas; parengtas spaudai 2002 m. gruodžio mėn.

DOI: 10.5755/j01.ppa.0.3.27299