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Citizen, Customer, Partner: Rethinking the Place of the Public in Public Management Theory to Practice

Scholars and practitioners have long debated what role the public should play in public management. When members of the public interact with the administrative side of government, should they be treated as customers, as citizens, or in some other manner? This article takes as its premise that members of the public assume three principal roles relative to public management: as customers, as partners, and as citizens. After placing these roles in the context of the history of public administration, the article draws from recent research to recommend guidelines for how public managers can work effectively with the public in these several capacities.

Today's public managers face a public far more complex than their predecessors encountered. This public is more complex in its numbers, with more organizations and more people, and more complex in the interests those organizations and individuals represent, ranging from the concerns of traditional business and labor groups to those of citizen and public interest groups. And it is more complex in the roles those organizations and interests play in public management, with the most prominent of those roles being as citizens, customers, and partners.

Working with this public can be as simple as providing specific services for individual members of the public when they come as *customers* seeking discrete services, such as a garbage pickup when a collection is missed. At other times, public managers need the public's help in producing services or pursuing public goals. Here, individuals may work as *partners* with government, for example, by sorting recyclables from other waste prior to collection by government. On still other occasions, managers deliberate with the public to answer larger questions about what services to provide or how to exercise governmental authority. Members of the public then assume what is arguably their most important role, as *citizens*, deliberating with public managers over the direction

of government, as when discussing whether to adopt a new recycling program. Finally, in probably the most common scenario, public managers must work with members of the public in more than one of these roles at a time, as when people expect to be treated courteously and helpfully, like customers, as they also voice opinions, as citizens, on the nature of public programs in which they might assist, as partners.

These realities pose a dual challenge for public administrators. First, they need to understand the nature of these publics, including what people expect as citizens, customers, and partners. Because government is not about simply providing *for* people, that understanding should also encompass what agencies need or want to ask of the public.

Public administrators need to know how to interact with the public.

As the second and more difficult part of the challenge, public administrators need to know how to interact with the public in each and all of the three roles. Most generally, as Terry Cooper

recognized, in the spirit of Mary Parker Follett (1924), administrators need to be able to work as "professional citizens" who "seek 'power with' rather than 'power over' the citizenry" (1984, 143).

The purpose of this article is to assist public managers in addressing this challenge. Toward that end, after first placing the three roles in the contemporary history of public administration, the article will draw from recent research to propose guidelines for how public managers can work effectively with the public in the several roles (for more extensive discussion of the roles and guidelines, see Thomas 2012). The guidelines are addressed principally to current or aspiring middle- to higher-level managers in both the public and nonprofit sectors and secondarily to street-level bureaucrats. In any of these capacities, the manager who knows how to work with the public in the three roles should be well equipped to work effectively with the public.

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The Public's Three Primary Roles

Controversy persists among public administration scholars and practitioners, especially in the United States, over how to view the public's role in public management, with the principal disagreement focusing on whether to view the public as customers (e.g., Osborne and Gaebler 1993) or as citizens (e.g., Schachter 1997). But the citizen versus customer debate oversimplifies by ignoring other roles that the public plays relative to public management. Frederickson (1991, 396) suggested five roles, and Roberts more recently listed seven "models of administration and the roles that citizens and administrators are expected to play in each of them," with a caution that those are only "some of the better known models" (2004, 327–28).

Amid this array of options, this article focuses on three roles that the public plays relative to public management: as citizen, customer, and partner. The logic for this choice is straightforward: First, as documented later, each of those roles encompasses a substantial proportion of the public's interactions with public management, and the several roles together cover most of those interactions. Second, the three roles can subsume some other roles, including those of regulatee, beneficiary, and client (e.g., Alford 2009, 34–35; Frederickson 1991, 404–5), thereby encompassing even more of the public's interactions with public management. Third, parsimony matters. Limiting discussion to three roles can simplify discussion, yet not at substantial cost if the three encompass most interactions.

The three roles reflect central ideas from successive waves of rethinking public management and public administration over the past half century. Beginning in the 1960s and extending to the present, each wave for a time dominated the discourse of public administration and management.

The New Public Administration: The Public as Citizen

The contemporary revival of interest in the public as citizen dates to the passage in the mid-1960s of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society legislation with its showpiece War on Poverty, a battery of programs designed to combat poverty in low-income, disproportionately African American communities. Concerned not to repeat the errors of earlier urban renewal programs, legislators required that the programs be developed and administered with the "maximum feasible participation" of residents of the target areas, a mandate that launched a new era of "citizen participation" (Moynihan 1969).

This citizen participation, which matured into contemporary "public involvement," differed in two crucial respects from traditional citizen involvement with government. First, whereas the proper role of the public traditionally had been viewed as confined to policy making by elected bodies, citizen participation focused squarely on policy implementation and administration, on involving the public in deciding how policies, once adopted, would be put into operation. Second, in contrast to the elite bias of earlier citizen involvement, as with urban renewal's "blue ribbon" advisory committees (e.g., Dahl 1961, 124), the new citizen participation broadened the definition of relevant citizens to include those of low income, such as "residents of the areas and members of the groups served" by the War on Poverty.

Around the same time, the public administration community became troubled by allegations of bias and injustice. Public administrators were sometimes characterized as the enemy of the disadvantaged, servants of the elite rather than of the public, bureaucrats who might pursue whatever strategy necessary to rebuff the demands of the disadvantaged (see Kirlin 1973; Lipsky 1968).

Stung by these criticisms, public administration began a period of soul searching, leading eventually to the development of a new perspective, which became known as the New Public Administration (e.g., Frederickson 1971; Marini 1971). Consistent with the War on Poverty's goals, this perspective included a case for more citizen participation in public administration as a means to address biases in administrative decision making. Bringing previously neglected constituencies into agency deliberations might lead to their interests being better reflected in agency decisions.

Although early citizen participation experiments often disappointed, requirements for involving the public and actual involvement in administrative decision making have grown substantially since the 1960s. In the United States, citizen participation requirements had been attached to more than 150 federal programs by the end of the 1970s (Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations 1979). "By the mid-1980s," according to Frederickson, "citizen participation had modified the usual methods of making decisions in a host of policy areas and had taken its place as a major feature of democratic administration" (1991, 406). Other democracies—from Brazil to Mexico to the Netherlands—experienced similar trends (see Ackerman 2004; Fung and Wright 2001).

The public probably plays its most important role in public management when it joins with managers in this kind of deliberation about the nature of public programs. Members of the public then take the citizen role, sharing responsibility for the core democratic function of determining the course of government. In a recent example from the Netherlands, leaders in the city of Enschede involved residents intensively in planning the future of a neighborhood devastated by an explosion that had killed 22 people. Officials developed an elaborate "process architecture," including "multiple participatory arenas," and involved a representative public in formulating and ultimately approving a comprehensive plan for the area (Denters and Klok 2010, 587).

On these occasions, public managers invite citizens to contribute their ideas and share decision-making authority. At its most extensive, this involvement engages citizens in formulating plans and proposals from the outset of an issue arising, as in the Dutch case, in which city officials brought residents on board before developing any plans for the devastated area. In other cases, public involvement finds managers consulting with the public, seeking ideas, but reserving the prerogative to decide.

The New Public Management: The Public as Customer

Thinking about the public as customers of government developed as part of another wave of public administration reform in the 1990s. Whereas citizen participation reforms aimed to improve

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governmental responsiveness by engaging citizens, this next wave focused on improving governmental performance principally by subjecting governments to more market competition. As one aspect of the market focus, governments were advised to view their publics as customers and to aim for “customer-driven government” (Osborne and Gaebler 1993, 166).

The New Public Management (NPM), as the movement became known, exerted an enormous influence on the practice of public administration. In the United States, NPM inspired the Clinton administration’s National Performance Review and a 1993 executive order (no. 12862) encouraging all federal agencies to set customer service standards. Similar initiatives influenced other countries, though with “variants from one jurisdiction to another” rather than as “a monolithic set of practice” (Alford and Hughes 2008, 134).

The idea of improving customer service in government also hit a sensitive nerve with members of the public who felt they had suffered at the hands of insensitive public agencies. In the United States, for example, the mere mention of departments of motor vehicles—the infamous DMVs—conjures images of long delays and unfriendly service for anyone seeking a driver’s license.

Individuals resemble customers in two crucial respects when they come to a DMV for a license or make a similar request of another public agency. First, they seek a discrete product or service for its personal value, not for its value for the larger community. As Roberts explained, “In this model,” in contrast to the citizen role, “individualism and the pursuit of self-interest are valued” (2004, 329). Second, a public agency is responsible for providing that good or service, sometimes for a price (the fee for a driver’s license), as is often the case with private businesses.

The reasons for these contacts defy full enumeration but include (1) complaints about garbage not being collected, (2) reports of potholes on residential streets, (3) inquiries about public health insurance reimbursements, (4) questions from the elderly about late pension payments, and (5) requests for information on local recreation programs. In each case, the request usually reflects the caller’s personal need, not the need of any larger community.

Based on this definition, more people probably interact with government as customers, coming to the administrative side of

government in pursuit of discrete goods and services, than in any other capacity. As one representative example, the city of Hampton, Virginia, reported 302,000 calls coming to its centralized customer call center in 2003, a figure more than twice the city’s population of 146,000 (311 Customer Call Center, Hampton, Virginia 2005). Even larger numbers may take their customer requests to the Internet. In Tampa, Florida, “self-service research sessions,” so called because they involve visitors exploring the city’s Web site without municipal staff involvement, numbered 1,635,786 in 2005, more than five times the city’s population (Steve Cantler, e-mail message to author, July 5, 2006). Earlier data, before the advent of 311, suggested that the proportions of residents in the United States who contacted their municipal government in a given

year with a customer-like “request for service or a complaint” ranged as high as 60 percent to 70 percent (see Coulter 1992, 306; Thomas and Melkers 1999), substantially exceeding the magnitude of any other involvement with government.

Governance and Coproduction: The Public as Partner

The latest thinking about the place of the public in public administration developed not as a reform but as a new school of thought on the work of governing. This perspective rests on the premise that government cannot serve as the sole provider of public services. Instead, that provision and the broader pursuit of public ends supposedly occur mostly through networks of private and nonprofit entities, members of the public, and governments, in a phenomenon that has become known as “governance” (e.g., Bingham, Nabatchi, and O’Leary 2005). Governance may have become “the dominant model of public sector management in the post-NPM era” (Alford and Hughes 2008, 137).

Discussions of governance revived interest in “coproduction,” an idea that enjoyed brief popularity in the United States several decades ago (e.g., Brudney and England 1983; Ostrom et al. 1978; Whitaker 1980). Coproduction occurs when governments partner with nongovernmental entities, including members of the public, to jointly produce services that governments previously produced on their own. Crime, for example, supposedly cannot be prevented by police action alone; it requires assistance from citizens and communities, an insight that inspired the spread of “neighborhood watch” programs to engage residents in monitoring suspicious activities. Similarly with schools, government can fund classrooms and teachers, but educational effectiveness hinges on students doing their part, preferably with parental support (Whitaker 1980).

Contemporary interest in coproduction is centered in Europe, where it has intrigued governments as well as scholars in both public and business administration (e.g., Alford 2009; Needham 2007; Pestoff 2006; Pestoff, Brandsen, and Verschuere 2012). Governments eye coproduction as a potential vehicle for doing more with less by involving private actors in service production and delivery. Scholars of business administration see extensive coproduction as essential because customers must join in “customizing” many products and services (e.g., Etgar 2008).

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As a result, across many or most public services and programs, effective production and delivery require partnering with the public. The effectiveness of most regulations, as one example, depends in part on the cooperation of the regulated, as when automobile drivers observe speed limits, stop signs, and antilittering laws. The same

characterization applies to members of the public as beneficiaries, such as trainees in public job training programs, as they are unlikely to find jobs without joining actively in the training and the job search (Alford 2009, 117–18).

Coproduction occurs both with individuals and with groups. At the level of individuals, as one illustration, the success of public information campaigns depends on people partnering by quitting smoking, reducing intake of high-calorie foods, or doing whatever else a campaign might advocate. At the group level, many local governments depend heavily on partnerships with community groups, as when neighborhood organizations share responsibility for running a recreation center.

Working with the Public as Customer, Partner, and Citizen: Guidelines for Public Managers

How should public managers work with the public in these three roles? Reversing the earlier sequence, the guidelines that follow build from what tends to be the least intensive (the customer role) to the moderately intensive (partner) to the most intensive (citizen).

Responding to the Public as Customer

Governments face a special challenge in providing good customer service: how to ensure that individuals who initiate contacts can easily reach someone who can help. Making a request of government often raises questions that do not arise when contacting a private business, starting with which government is responsible. Most people live under the jurisdiction of multiple governments, making the answer often unclear. Even when the government is known, additional questions may arise over which department is responsible or which phone number is appropriate to call. These questions point to the need for visible, accessible, and navigable systems for contacting governments.

In response, many governments, especially at the local level in the United States, have instituted centralized call centers and/or Web sites where individuals can bring requests to government, as summarized in this first guideline for working with the public as customers:

Customer guideline 1: Consider developing centralized contact points, including (1) a call center based on 311 or a seven- or 10-digit phone number, in tandem with (2) a prominent, easily navigable Web presence for receiving and responding to questions, requests, and complaints from the public.

From their inception in Baltimore, Maryland in 1997, 311 call centers had spread rapidly to 108 other cities and counties and four universities in the United States and Canada by 2013, with other local governments in the process of adoption (see <http://www.911dispatch.com/info/311map.html>). As documented earlier, they have proved enormously popular with the public. Similar call centers are developing in other countries (e.g., Xin 2013).

Web-based contact points offer the potential of a richer information base and greater ability to explore than is possible with 311, an important advantage because most inquiries from the public appear to ask only for information (e.g., Corker and Eichenthal 2006,

271). Government Web sites often function principally as a kind of “big library,” a source for all kinds of information, akin to the role that libraries traditionally have served (Thomas and Streib 2005, 277).

Mobile devices represent the latest frontier where governments can facilitate members of the public making requests of government. The development of smartphones and other mobile devices has been accompanied by a proliferation of applications for connecting with governments, suggesting this second guideline:

Customer guideline 2: Explore the adoption of mobile device technologies for receiving and responding to questions, requests, and complaints from members of the public.

The City of Boston launched one of the earliest of these innovations in 2009 with a free iPhone application known as Citizens Connect, which can be used to submit complaints as well as to access information about the city and its services. To report a problem, a user opens the application to a reduced version of the city’s home page, navigates to a list of possible problems, chooses the appropriate one, takes a picture of it, and sends it to the city. According to city officials, although it initially attracted only a small fraction of the numbers who called 311, Citizens Connect reached “a whole different constituency that had not traditionally come into City Hall or called the mayor’s hotline—or had even come on to do a Web service request” (Vander Veen 2010).

In another case, Department of Motor Vehicle offices in Missouri improved service to customers through the adoption of a “virtual line management” system (Nichols 2010). Rather than waiting on site, people can “input a mobile phone number to hold their place in line” at the DMV, freeing them for other tasks until a text message alerts them that their turn has come.

Cost may pose the principal barrier to adopting these new technologies. New 311 systems, in particular, require substantial up-front funding, typically in the millions of dollars for large cities (e.g., Mazerolle et al. 2002, 103). Yet the rapid diffusion of these systems—more rapid than the earlier spread of 911—implies that governments increasingly view the potential benefits as worth the cost (Corker and Eichenthal 2006).

Facilitating access is the first step, but public agencies should also commit to providing other elements of customer service:

Customer guideline 3: Endeavor to provide high-quality customer service when interacting with members of the public.

The specific elements vary depending on the functional area (e.g., Poister, Thomas, and Berryman, forthcoming) but are likely to include (1) listening carefully to the request or complaint, (2) helping to the extent possible, (3) personalizing responses, (4) responding promptly, and (5) responding courteously (Nel et al. 2000).

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“are developed to do a specific job” and often do that job well, but they “do not lend themselves easily to change,” such as an enhanced customer orientation (Lovell 1992, 395). Frontline personnel may succumb to “an excessive reliance on rules,” seeing themselves as “controlled and frustrated by” bureaucratic systems and unable to provide the personalized attention that good customer service entails (Lovell 1992, 396; for a case in point, see Hartmann and Khademian 2010).

Centralizing access through 311 phone and online systems can help overcome that resistance. The training that staff for these systems receive (e.g., Gootman 2010) may create change agents who will work with other parts of the organization to improve responsiveness to customer requests and complaints.

The results can be rewarding, as the experience of the U.S. Mint illustrates. In 1994, “If you called the Mint, it took on average two minutes before anyone answered, and if you sent a letter, you could wait forty-two days for an answer. If you actually ordered something, you could wait eight weeks or more to get it” (Carbone 2008, 267). All that changed after Philip Diehl became the Mint’s director and gave a high priority to improving customer service. In only five years, Diehl was able to move the Mint to the highest ratings for customer satisfaction of any government agency. “Calls were answered on average in 17.5 seconds, letters in three days, and orders were filled in less than two weeks.” Along the way, the Mint gained new support in Congress.

As the other side of working with the public as customers, public agencies should seek to learn about and from their publics (e.g., Osborne and Gaebler 1993, 173). “About” refers to whom the customers are and what they want; “from” encompasses what customers can tell the agency about its successes, failures, and overall performance. Both kinds of information can be gained from customer or citizen relations management (CRM) systems that utilize data from call centers and their online equivalents (Edwards and Thomas 2005; King 2007), leading to this guideline:

Customer guideline 4: Consider the adoption of a customer relations management system when (1) a centralized citizen contacting system is in place, (2) adequate resources are available, and (3) leadership is committed to effectively implementing the CRM system.

Although citizen contacts represent an excellent source of information on citizen experiences with and perceptions of public services, data on contacts were seldom collected and analyzed prior to the advent of 311 and online contact systems. However, once a CRM system is in place, contacts data can be entered into the system and converted to output for regular performance monitoring.

To be sure, data on contacts should be interpreted cautiously, as they reflect more the opinions of middle- to higher-income users (Thomas and Melkers 1999, 2001). As Fountain argued, if public administrators give these contacts a high priority, “what arrangements will ensure that they listen to those customers less able to exercise voice,

who cannot or do not express their preferences well or clearly?” (2001, 65).

The best CRM systems address this problem by incorporating a variety of other performance data, including (1) results of representative citizen surveys, (2) records of employee workload assignments, (3) employee reports on services and problems (e.g., crime reports, number of potholes filled), and (4) information from third parties (e.g., economic data) (National Performance Management Advisory Committee 2010; Swiss and Straus 2008; Walker, Damanpour, and Devece 2011). Regular monitoring of these various data may provide a balanced perspective on service quality as well as possible emerging problems (e.g., Edwards and Thomas 2005).

The data might be used, for example, for crowdsourcing, whereby data from large populations are analyzed to suggest solutions for difficult public problems. Elizabeth Warren saw that potential when she suggested that citizen complaints drive the agenda for the federal Consumer Financial Protection Bureau that she was developing. As Warren told her staff, “I want you to think about this more like ‘heat maps’ for targeted zip codes where problems are emerging” (Dayen 2010). Having the data centralized also appears to facilitate interdepartmental cooperation and promote the development of a more “holistic view of customers” (King 2007, 53).

To promote more effective use of the data, governments should consider two additional strategies, as this last customer guideline recommends:

Customer guideline 5: After adopting CRM systems, governments should plan for staff training on analyzing CRM data and for regular meetings to discuss the data.

As Behn (2005, 308–9) observed, it takes “talented people” to make these systems work effectively; training can help develop that talent. It might be targeted especially to those staff who show a facility for the data, so as to enhance their ability to move readily between the different types of data in analyzing issues (for an illustration, see Thomas 2012, 67–68). Lack of the necessary training could help explain why the principal benefits of these systems sometimes come from increased customer satisfaction rather than from better data analysis (e.g., King 2007).

Regular meetings, for their part, can facilitate different officials drawing on each other’s tacit knowledge about a government’s functioning to build better understanding of CRM-generated data. Local governments that follow the latter strategy typically meet on a weekly or biweekly basis for department-level reviews, and less frequently for reviews by the mayor or city manager (see Behn 2006).

Responding to the Public as Partner

Thinking about the public as partners may best begin with managers revisiting their outlook on the roles that they and the public should play in public services. Many public managers still see themselves as service providers or experts. In the words of one local public administrator, “We should provide services, as well as expertise and education” (Bryer 2009,

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274). Managers would do better to view themselves as the lead partners in service development and delivery, where effectiveness requires that the public also contribute. As Etgar observed, the success of coproduction will be no greater than “the extent of management’s belief in the advantages of such relationships” (2008, 101).

Toward that end, public managers should first ask what assistance they need from the public:

Partner guideline 1: Define in advance any assistance desired from the public in order for services or programs to be effective.

That assistance could entail hauling trash bags to the curb for waste collection, applying public job training in interviewing for jobs, or quitting smoking in response to an antismoking public information campaign. As Bovaird suggested, contributions from the public may be desirable anywhere “across the full chain of service planning, design, commissioning, managing, delivering, monitoring, and evaluation activities” (2007, 847). As a result, managers need to ask, what steps are necessary to produce the service or desired outcome, and where and how can the public contribute?

For their part, many members of the public share the outlook that it is government’s job to deliver services, not theirs. Or they may feel, often accurately, that government is trying to dump service-delivery responsibilities (e.g., Bovaird 2007, 856). Managers consequently need to strategize how to gain any desired assistance.

The task should be easiest when the citizen partner will be the principal beneficiary: “When the benefits of the citizens’ efforts go primarily to the citizen-producers themselves, coproduction is likely to be the greatest” (Pestoff 2006, 508). For example, because participants in training programs for the unemployed receive the principal program benefits (i.e., jobs and income), they are more likely to do their part to coproduce by engaging actively in the training and giving their best in job interviews (Alford 2009, 99).

Because most areas of coproduction cannot direct their principal benefits to those who assist, other strategies are also necessary. As a first step, public managers should consider how to make the task easier for people to perform:

Partner guideline 2: Where assistance is desired from the public, simplify the task to the extent possible.

Two illustrations may make this point:

- Postal authorities in Australia simplified the public’s use of postal codes on outgoing mail by persuading envelope manufacturers to add four empty boxes to all envelopes (Alford 2009, 85–86).
- Researchers developed “microneedles” for providing flu shots through the mail. These needles come attached “to a patch like a Band-Aid” that can be rubbed against the skin where the needles—which are “so small you don’t even feel them”—“barely penetrate” before releasing their vaccine. The many people who currently will not go to the trouble of getting flu shots might change their minds “if they could get it in the mail,” thereby

simplifying the task and enhancing the coproduction of public health (Schmid 2010).

Tasks can also be simplified by better structuring choices. Thaler and Sunstein (2008) argued that government frequently poses choices so poorly that people are unlikely to make decisions that contribute to societal goals. As one glaring example, they cite the Medicare prescription drug program for the elderly, which “offered a menu with lots of choices” but “gave participants little guidance to help them make the best selections from the menu” and “chose a default option at random (!) for six million people who were automatically enrolled” (2008, 160).

They recommended instead that, where latitude is available, government structure choices in the manner “most likely to help and least likely to inflict harm” (Thaler and Sunstein 2008, 72). In the area of organ donations in the United States, for example, “most states use what is called an explicit consent rule, meaning that people have to take some concrete steps to demonstrate that they want to be donors,” a requirement that appears to “deter otherwise willing donors from registering” to donate. By contrast, a “presumed consent” default choice requiring people to opt out attracts many more volunteers (Thaler and Sunstein 2008, 176–77). As another example, Thaler and Sunstein (2008, 191–93) applauded the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for requiring automobile manufacturers to add estimated fuel cost to new car fuel economy stickers, viewing the cost data as much more useful to buyers than miles per gallon estimates alone.

A closely related approach involves trying to improve the ability of members of the public (Alford 2009, 200):

Partner guideline 3: Where assistance is desired from the public, consider how to enhance the public’s ability to provide that assistance.

In that spirit, a local government in Aarhus, Denmark, recently experimented with providing language support to assist immigrant parents in developing their children’s Danish-language abilities. In a field experiment designed by the government’s academic partner, immigrant parents with three- to four-year-old children enrolled in a public child care center were randomly assigned to control or treatment groups in which

Each child in the treatment group received a “language suitcase,” developed by language development experts, containing children’s books, a game, and a video tutorial on how parents can help their children learn Danish. The childcare employees presented the suitcase to the families, suggested how they could use it, and included the suitcase as a part of the regular discussions with the families about their children’s language development. (Jakobsen 2013, 36)

The results showed the assistance had “a positive effect on coproduction for the families with the greatest need for the service” (Jakobsen 2013, 49).

Managers can also appeal to people’s sense of what is “right” by seeking to activate social norms to encourage coproduction:

Partner guideline 4: Where assistance is desired from the public, consider how social norms and social networks can be activated to motivate that assistance.

The experience of the Sacramento Municipal Utility District illustrates how this principle can be applied. In an effort to increase energy conservation, the district began in 2009 to put “smiley faces” on the bills of consumers whose energy usage fell below that of similar households in the area. After six months, an analysis showed that “customers who received the personalized report reduced energy use by 2 percent more than those who got standard statements,” presumably in response to what they had learned about how they fit area norms (Kaufman 2009). As that example also hints, normative appeals may even enhance coproduction in situations in which “free riders” are visibly not contributing (e.g., by not conserving energy, by not recycling, by driving during air quality alerts).

The strategy of appealing to social norms may hold even more potential for spurring coproduction in the current era of pervasive social media. Consider how one randomized experiment showed social media influencing political behavior:

[P]olitical mobilization messages delivered to 61 million Facebook users during the 2010 U.S. congressional elections . . . directly influenced political self-expression, information seeking and real-world voting behavior of millions of people. Furthermore, the messages not only influenced the users who received them but also the users’ friends, and friends of friends. (Bond et al. 2012)

Public managers might consider similar, if smaller-scale, use of these media to activate social norms conducive to coproduction.

In contrast to social norms, material or financial incentives have a poor record of increasing coproduction (Alford 2009, 192). By their nature, material rewards invoke a sense of precisely specified exchanges unlikely to motivate much coproduction, in part because most coproductive work in the public sector “is difficult to specify in advance.” Material incentives are better employed as part of a larger strategy:

Partner guideline 5: Where assistance is desired from the public, use material incentives only in combination with other incentives to motivate that assistance.

As a case in point, neighborhood residents were persuaded to join in community environmental policing in parts of California and Louisiana by a combination of the anticipated personal benefit of better air quality *and* the sense they gained of contributing to their community (Laurian 2004).

Finally, sanctions also do not perform well as a primary incentive for coproduction. People often take offense at the threat of sanctions, especially if they are already inclined to cooperate. In addition, sanctions typically prompt cooperation only while people feel that they are being monitored, and governments lack the resources for

sustained monitoring (see Alford 2009, 198–99). In a Washington State study of seat belt usage, for example, the threat of sanctions for not buckling up appeared to exert only a modest influence on compliance (Curtis, Thurman, and Nice 1991).

Yet sanctions serve two positive functions that make them a necessary element for many forms of coproduction. First, “when they are visibly wielded, sanctions deter the *resistant* clients from non-compliance, or punish them when they fail to contribute.” Second, in so doing, sanctions also guarantee “to the potentially cooperative that the process to which they are contributing is fair” (Alford 2009, 198–99)—that is, those who are likely to comply can see that they are not naively cooperating while others flout the law with impunity. Those arguments lead to this guideline:

Partner guideline 6: Where assistance is desired from the public, retain the option for applying sanctions if and when reasonable cooperation does not occur based on other incentives.

Responding to the Public as Citizen

Involving the public in administrative decision making promises a number of benefits for both public agencies and the public.

For agencies, benefits can include (1) better information, as when citizens contribute

ground-level knowledge that otherwise would be unavailable to decision makers (e.g., Beierle 2002, 746); (2) greater likelihood of the public accepting any decision it helps make, which can facilitate program implementation; (3) improved governmental performance, as documented in such disparate venues as state departments of transportation in the United States (Neshkova and Guo 2011) and rural water supply projects in India (Prokopy 2005); and, perhaps, (4) increased citizen trust. For citizens, the benefits can include (1) better fit of public policies and programs to community preferences, (2) improved community capacity for other joint efforts, and, ultimately, (3) better quality of life.

Yet public involvement also brings problems. Those who become involved seldom constitute a population cross-section, sometimes looking instead like an odd lot of “the curious, the fearful, and the available” (McComas, Besley, and Trumbo 2006, 691–92). Public involvement can also be costly by requiring more time of public administrators to work with the public, by undermining necessary quality standards, and by raising program costs to meet the public’s demands. One study found that “involving the public in science and decision-making costs about twice as much for a project than when the work is performed without public involvement” (Till and Meyer 2001, 377).

Fearing these problems, many public managers historically have sought to avoid public involvement. They would be better advised to view public involvement as a contingent proposition, desirable under some circumstances but not others and, when desirable, best pursued with strategies that vary by issue. A handful of guidelines can help in understanding and responding to these contingencies.

To begin with, whenever an issue arises for a public agency, its managers should consider whether public involvement in deliberating

the issue might be desirable. These issues could concern implementation of a new program, a perceived problem with an existing program, or some other community concern related to the agency's programs or mission. Faced with any of those issues, managers should ask whether they need (1) more information to make a better decision and/or (2) public acceptance of the decision in order to achieve its implementation (see also Bryson et al. 2013, 26; Thomas 1990).

In the area of information, administrators may feel that they do not know what citizens want from a program or what the community context is like, with either kind of information providing grounds to engage the public. Even stronger grounds exist if (1) implementation of any decision requires the public's acceptance and (2) that acceptance cannot be assumed without involvement. Some administrative decisions do not require citizen acceptance to be implemented; the "consent of the governed" sometimes can be assumed when actions flow directly from the decisions of elected policy-making bodies. For the most part, though, administrative decisions that have a substantial impact on the public will require extensive involvement in order to gain the public acceptance necessary for implementation (Thomas 1990, 1993, 1995).

Absent either need, inviting public involvement can unnecessarily complicate decision making and should be avoided, if possible:

Citizen guideline 1: Do not invite public involvement (unless required) when neither more information nor public acceptance is needed to reach or implement a decision.

Citizens who give their time to public involvement may reasonably expect that their ideas will influence the eventual decision.

As Bryson et al. explained, issues fitting this description are likely to concern "problems that are primarily technical or operational" (2013, 25), concerns unlikely to hold much interest for the public. To be sure, any judgment that an issue does not require public involvement should be regarded as tentative, subject to change if events (e.g., new evidence of the public's interest) suggest otherwise.

When, on the other hand, the need for information and/or acceptance points to the desirability of public involvement, managers should consider whether their agency brings any essential goals or constraints to the issue, as this guideline recommends:

Citizen guideline 2: In advance of decision making with public involvement, define necessary decision constraints, such as decision standards (e.g., scientific or technical), budget constraints, time constraints, and/or limiting of the choice to two or a few options.

Defining these constraints in advance permits their assertion at the outset of the ensuing public involvement.

At the same time, managers should try to minimize these constraints, as this guideline stipulates:

Citizen guideline 3: In decision making with public involvement, minimize the decision constraints, such as technical

standards, time constraints, and/or limiting of the choice to two or a few options.

Minimizing constraints enables the agency to open more aspects of an issue to public scrutiny while at the same time giving the public more reason to think that its input will be used. As well, public managers have been known to assert "essential" constraints that ultimately proved poorly thought out (e.g., Manring 1993, 352). In the worst-case scenario, agencies have limited the public's input to an either/or choice, as with proposed sitings of undesirable land uses (e.g., highways, cell towers), which may succeed only in mobilizing public opposition. Time constraints also can prove mistaken or illusory because mobilized publics may be able to override the constraints, only further delaying decision making (e.g., Thomas 1990, 441–42).

The effort to minimize constraints should be part of an understanding of a key principle of public involvement:

Citizen guideline 4: Recognize that public involvement requires sharing decision-making authority.

Too many public involvement initiatives have ignored this principle, limiting the public's role to commenting on a proposed decision that is essentially a fait accompli. Citizens who give their time to public involvement may reasonably expect that their ideas will influence the eventual decision. Denied that influence, they may not buy into the decision, which may have been the reason for inviting their involvement in the first place.

The real issues for public managers, when inviting public involvement, should be how much and in what forms to share their authority:

Citizen guideline 5: Plan to share decision-making authority to the extent and through the means appropriate, given the issue's constraints, the nature of the public, and the like.

The sharing of authority could extend to fully collaborative decision making, in which public officials work jointly with the public in making a decision, or it could be limited to consultation, in which managers seek ideas from the public but retain authority to make the decision. In general, fewer agency constraints will recommend more authority sharing (for more detailed guidelines, see Bryson et al. 2013; Thomas 2012, chap. 7–9).

Planning for public involvement must also address how to obtain the most representative turnout:

Citizen guideline 6: In any decision making with public involvement, undertake careful and thorough advance identification of possible relevant external actors and groups and recruit those representatives aggressively.

Although neither goal is easily achieved, various techniques are available for pursuing both (e.g., Bryson 2004; Bryson et al. 2013; Thomas 2012, 147–57; Thomas and Poister 2009).

Choosing the appropriate forms of involvement can enhance the likelihood of achieving those goals:

Citizen guideline 7: In decision making with public involvement, employ a variety of techniques and offer multiple opportunities to hear from the public.

Public officials will typically obtain more diverse and more representative readings on public sentiments by (1) using a number of techniques (e.g., public meetings, advisory committees, citizen surveys) and (2) providing multiple opportunities (e.g., public meetings at different sites and different times) (for a good illustration, see Denters and Klok 2010).

As a last crucial step before commencing public involvement, managers should confirm that the results are likely to be used:

Citizen guideline 8: Do not initiate a process of public involvement unless the relevant authorities are committed to utilizing the results.

Those authorities might consist of only the manager who is in charge, or they could extend to elected officials. Whatever the case, engaging the public in the absence of this commitment can waste everyone's time and nurture distrust and skepticism in the public (see also Bryson et al. 2013, 27).

Although public involvement requires extensive planning, actual involvement should begin earlier rather than later:

Citizen guideline 9: Initiate public involvement in decision making as early as possible.

Earlier initiation reduces the potential for an issue to accumulate constraints before it reaches the public and decreases the risk of the public wondering why their input has not yet been invited.

Public involvement efforts will benefit from following a number of other recommended practices, including these:

- Encouraging participants to come with and maintain an open mind (Barabas 2004, 690)
- Planning for both (1) agency education of citizen participants (McComas 2010, 180) and (2) communication of citizen perspectives to the agency (Beierle and Konisky 2000, 596)
- Structuring opportunities for face-to-face small-group interaction, typically nested within larger involvement mechanisms (Ostrom 1990, 90)
- Using a trained facilitator, preferably a neutral outsider (Baker, Addams, and Davis 2005, 297)

Finally, beyond public involvement per se, public managers are well advised to remain alert to emerging issues:

Citizen guideline 10: Anticipate issues rather than allowing them to develop elsewhere.

Government offers many advantages for resolving public issues—including its authority, its legitimacy, and its access to decision-making forums—but those advantages lose potency if government comes late to an issue (e.g., Ostrom 1990, 100; Thomas 1993).

Conclusions

Students of public administration have debated how public administrators should view the public for as long as the field has existed. This article started from the premise that the public assumes three principal roles relative to government—as customers, as citizens, and as partners—and public managers need to know how to work with the public in all three (for more detailed discussion, see Thomas 2012).

Most commonly, managers probably interact with members of the public in more than one role at a time. What begins, for example, as a customer-like complaint about a pothole can quickly expand to include a partner element if the call center operator asks for details of the problem (e.g., location, size, and hazard that it poses). This interaction succeeds only if call center operators know to view callers as both customers and potential partners. Viewing them as partners prompts the questions that can help in solving the problem; viewing them as customers prompts the service—listening closely, being helpful, responding promptly, and showing courtesy—that could motivate callers to give informative answers.

Similarly, when engaging public involvement, public managers are advised to keep in mind guidelines for customer service and partnering. Effective engagement with the public requires managers to listen, help, respond promptly, and be courteous, the core elements of good customer service. These officials should also be thinking about where partnering might be desirable, especially as the contours of a decision begin to emerge. Effective public involvement can build momentum toward the increased partnering often necessary to support a decision reached with that involvement. All of these components hold prominent places in, for example, the “citizen-centered collaborative public management” model proposed by Cooper, Bryer, and Meek (2006, 79–80).

Understanding how to work with the public in all three roles should

The biggest challenge for public managers may be to rethink how they view the public, recognizing that the citizen/customer/partner perspective brings new needs: to gain better information about customers, to grasp the reality of the public partnering in service production, and to see the value of sharing authority with the public.

be within the abilities of most public managers. As Jos and Tompkins argued, public managers are accustomed to working with the public in more than one role at a time: “Rightly or wrongly, public policy often requires administrators to serve the same person or group in different ways that reflect . . . multiple roles. Social workers must profile both professional job referrals and sanction those who violate rules; regulators must treat the regulated as both regulated subjects and citizen stakeholders cooperatively engaged in voluntary self-policing” (2009, 1084).

The biggest challenge for public managers may be to rethink how they view the public,

recognizing that the citizen/customer/partner perspective brings new needs: to gain better information about customers, to grasp the reality of the public partnering in service production, and to see the value of sharing authority with the public. As well, managers should be prepared to encounter resistance: improved customer service can be costly and can challenge traditional organizational culture; members of the public may resist requests to coproduce; and the public may not join in public involvement in a representative and cooperative fashion.

If these challenges appear daunting, the experience of public managers provides grounds for optimism. With each role profiled here, managers have led the way on many successful innovations—from launching popular customer service contact centers, to partnering with parents to coproduce better language skills among immigrant children, to engaging the public in collaborative decision making to rebuild a devastated neighborhood. More successes can be expected if managers embrace the public's three roles as customer, partner, and citizen.

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