Chapter VI

Public Administration for a Democratic Society: Instilling Public Trust through Greater Collaboration with Citizens

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ABSTRACT

The question of "how wide to open the window" to hear citizen feedback and let them influence local politics is highly topical. The authors provide an informative introduction to the prerequisites for collaboration between citizens and public administration. They claim that the re-engineering focus on citizen participation remains too rooted in old paradigmatic thinking. In order to truly engage citizens, one needs to break out of the confines of 18th century thought and explore how participatory democratic theory can provide the foundation for 21st century political design and alter our concepts of democratic governance. The authors focus on two different projects that

have demonstrated how administrators and other government officials can engage citizens in agenda-setting, addressing complex policy issues, and facilitating implementation of policies. These models position citizens as "owners" of government, not as "clients" or even partners in making and implementing policies through choices. One method, called Televote, is a form of scientific polling that elicits informed and considered opinions from randomly selected respondents. The other method, a version of face-to-face meetings, was employed in Uniontown, Alabama to engage citizens on an ongoing basis to establish citizen agendas, develop policies, and implement programs. Finally, the authors reflect how electronic town meetings can be used to help build community and reinvigorate democracy.

INTRODUCTION

Public mistrust of and alienation from government has been increasing rapidly since the 1960s. In the 1980s and 1990s, it reached epic proportions. In America, public disenchantment has been documented in public surveys, low voter turnout rates, the growth of antigovernment organizations, taxpayer revolts, movements for downsizing and privatization of governmental functions, and a theory and practice of "reinventing" government led by no other than the former Vice President of the United States, Al Gore.

What does this mean for the public administrator? How has this high-level distrust and dissatisfaction impacted those who have chosen the profession of public service through government employment? How are they dealing with citizen demands for more and better services with less financial support? How are they responding to charges of impersonal, inefficient bureaucracies that serve their own personal interests rather than the public interests?

Moreover, as society becomes more complex, more diverse, and more dependent on Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), the role of the public administrator becomes far more complicated and dependent on new skills to effectively communicate with such a disgruntled public. Too often, citizens are left totally out of the loop as to what public administrators are doing, what problems the administrators face in accomplishing their missions, and how citizens feel about what is being done for them and how it is being accomplished.

It is important to emphasize that this new, unprecedented, and enduring crisis in public administration is part and parcel of the more general crisis in modern representative democracies everywhere, a crisis in confidence and legitimacy between angry and disgusted citizenries (as contrasted to apathetic and disinterested ones) and their governments at all levels and throughout the world. Public administrators everywhere are baffled and frustrated at the hostility and misunderstanding of citizens about their goals and work and are puzzled about how to meet rising demands for more and better services with a diminished base of resources.

It is our contention, and we are hardly alone in our view, that public executives (as well as legislators) are, in part, to blame for this deteriorating state of affairs. This is because they find comfort in thinking in traditional but obsolete theoretical frameworks and are comforted by using familiar but obsolescent methods to engage the citizenry in real and meaningful dialogue about their mutual objectives, their shared or divergent interests, and the best means with which to implement policies.

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