Taking a long view over thousands of years, citizens of China, Korea, Sumer, India, Babylon, Egypt, Israel, Greece, Rome, Africa, Oceania and the Americas consented to the establishment of governments for a broad range of purposes including, but not limited, to national security, social order (criminal justice system), commerce, regulation, education, health and social services, public health, international relations, quality of life, and tax collection.

After millennia of traditional governance, we are now entering an era of increasingly complex, yet impersonal, contexts in which collective capacities are under stress. Citizens are doubting the efficacy of their government’s abilities to deliver public services, and the public sector has not adequately met a growing series of challenges to its performance. Yet governments must deliver as promised in the foundational documents that legitimate every jurisdiction. Shared phrases communicate those promises across declarations, federal and state constitutions, city charters, oaths of office, codes of ethics, inaugural addresses and legislation, implicitly or explicitly charging public administrators to:

- guarantee life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness;
- provide for the security of person, property and free religious and political opinion;
- protect the lives, health or safety of employees;
- provide for the aid, care and support of the needy...against the hazards of unemployment, sickness and old age;
- provide for an efficient system of high quality public educational institutions and services;
- support construction and repairing of roads;
- assure prevention of fires;
- organize a police department, a fire department, a public works department, a parks and recreation department;
- save and restore our forests and the great improvement of waterways;
- attend to sanitation, pure food and the conditions of labor;
- deliver better education, better health, better housing, better transportation, a cleaner environment.

Public administration at a crossroad: Five enduring challenges

Marc Holzer

Abstract
The field of public administration has long promised to produce a wide range of services, and for millennia government did so. However, in the course of the last 50 years, public trust has declined precipitously in the US. The public sector faces five crosscutting challenges in reversing that decline. Although the public sector does produce at a high level, there are serious deficiencies in the utilization of human resources, in making the case for government performance to the public, in identifying innovations that could enhance services, in speaking to the agendas of elected officials, in confronting the naïve assumptions of the business model of government, and in empowering bureaucratic resisters to help avoid disastrous decisions.

Keywords
bureaucracy, human resource, innovation, performance, public administration, public service

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More than ever, meeting traditional expectations, and confronting emerging problems, is the mission of governments. And that is particularly evident in Asia: “China and its neighbors continue to serve as evidence that government matters more than ever in terms of maintaining economic prosperity. . .in meeting citizens’ expectations that the promises made in foundational documents. . .will be fulfilled.” (Holzer & Zhang, 2019). The Chinese Public Administration Review has served as a leading comparative forum for country-specific adaptations of Western approaches to public administration across a range of innovations such as public-private partnerships, innovation and entrepreneurship in the public sector, and nonprofit management (Lu et al., 2019).

Still, we must ask: Has government failed in fulfilling its promises to citizen? The answer is a qualified “Yes.” Governments have continued traditional patterns of behavior, failing to respond to increasingly dynamic environments peopled by citizens who hold expectations and aspirations for more effective services, for more meaningful communications, for more respect from their public servants. Perhaps “failure” is too strong a descriptor, but the gap between services and expectations has certainly widened precipitously. Trust in government has declined, threatening government’s funding, its monopolies over critical services, and perhaps its very future in terms of pressures to privatize, to contract out, even to withdraw from the community. Governments have enabled this decline of confidence:

By not measuring, reporting and communicating their achievements to stakeholders.
By resisting the transparency that would build trust with their stakeholders.
By inadequately regulating the private sector to avoid crises such as inflation, banking, oil spills and global warming.
By not following through on critical projects and systems, such as flood control and pollution abatement.
By tolerating impersonal and counterproductive bureaucratic pathologies.
And, overall, by inadequately managing and innovating in such critical areas as public education, health care, and senior services.

To be fair, we must also ask: How have citizens, their elected representatives, and the private sector failed government? Yes, they have done so:

By resistance to paying adequate taxes for services they demand.
By willful ignorance. Many citizens, and their media surrogates, do not understand objective, scientific research—the very findings that drive government programs.

By magical thinking, assuming lower taxes will somehow generate higher revenues, that public health measures are not necessary to fight pandemics or plagues.
By callousness in not willingly contributing tax dollars for critical services to their unfortunate neighbors—the homeless, the hungry, the sick—who are no longer supported by their families or neighbors.
By projecting very broadly from their personal experiences—“if I could make it, anyone can”—thereby ignoring the difficult circumstances many people are born into and must live under.

Given these problems, where does public administration go from here in terms of carrying out its missions to deliver promised services? What are the significant, but largely underrecognized, challenges to:

Undoing authoritarian relationships that limit organizations?
Empowering employees throughout public organizations so as to bring many more good ideas to bear on complex problem solving?
Innovating with technology for problem solving?
Measuring services and communicating results, including benefit/cost analyses?
Arguing for public investments comparable to those in the private sector?
Scrutinizing and punishing fraud, theft and abuse?
Raising and enforcing ethical standards?
Developing public management competencies for the great majority of government managers—elected or appointed—who operate without that knowledge, relying on simplistic adages, quips or idioms?

Effective government demands effective responses to such enduring questions. Five crosscutting challenges are particularly worthy of attention across the globe.

Challenge 1: How can we confront the misleading assumptions of the “Business Model”?

The “Good Government Movement,” which established the foundation of public administration in the US and worldwide in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, was an emphasis on “Efficiency, Efficiency, Efficiency.” In the US, Professor Woodrow Wilson, writing on “The Study of Administration,” called for a scientific, methodical approach (decades before he was elected to the presidency) (Wilson, 1887, p. 198):

“It is the object of administrative study to discover, first, what government can properly and successfully do, and, secondly, how it can do these proper things with the utmost possible
efficiency and at the least possible cost either of money or of energy... only careful study can supply that light... The field of administration is a field of business.”

Taylor (1914) advocated for “scientific management” in both the public and private sectors. And as president, Ronald Reagan repeatedly argued “Government is the problem, not the solution,” while appointing businesspeople to high positions in government, positions for which they had no experience, no training and no understanding. Decades later Donald Trump made the same mistake with the same poor consequences. As Columbia University professor Sayre (1958) warned, “public and private management are fundamentally alike in all unimportant respects.” There are certainly crucial differences in management requirements in public and private sectors, and it is the responsibility of public administration scholars and practitioners to point this out. As Harvey (2012) more recently advised: “We should no more want the government to be run like a business than a business to be run like the government. The key issue is this: not everything that is profitable is of social value and not everything of social value is profitable. The proper role of government is the latter.”

Government and business differ on several characteristics:

First, government agencies operate in a much more complex and political decision-making environment. In the private sector, decisions are typically made by a few owners-leaders at the top of the hierarchy. In government, multiple constituencies are represented in the legislative branch, diversity is expected in executive branch, and decisions are evaluated via judicial action within the framework of constitutions, laws and regulations. Unions have a voice in the policy implementation process. Interest groups make their preferences known on every issue.

Second, businesses operate in pursuit of profits or sales or market share. Public services have no such simple metrics, no one bottom line. Every service is viewed by stakeholders through multiple lenses, and multiple measures do not add up to the neat and simple metrics—profit and loss, price of stocks, future projections—that drive markets. Government services cannot be easily reduced to a few simple measures. Each service may have multiple goals; each can be gauged by metrics that cover services, outputs, outcomes, impacts. Many results are not easily measurable as they accrue to individual citizens and businesses, because they are very long-term and indirect, or as events avoided, such as terrorist attacks, accidents, or illnesses.

Third, government already incorporates advanced business systems and practices into its operations. Some of the most prominent Federal programs have been honored as exemplars alongside their private sector counterparts. When governments do not buy the most efficient systems and equipment, it is often because they are deliberately and politically starved for funds. When they make seemingly arbitrary bureaucratic decisions, it is typically because they are adhering to the law and its derivative regulations; private corporations have much more discretion and degrees of freedom.

Fourth, government is, to some extent, deliberately inefficient. The need for approvals and oversight is a purposeful drag to ensure compliance with law and regulations, with ethics, with the budget. The need to serve everyone is itself inherently inefficient as those clients may be people that businesses often avoid: special education students or services that are time consuming and not cost effective—such as selling a few stamps to an elderly person. Many costly services cannot be summarily dropped or consolidated, such as rural post offices or very small police departments, because they provide considerable public value in terms of identifying a community (Table 1).

Democratic values are foundational principles for public organizations, whereas private companies are not held as extensively to that standard. Yes, many private companies have shareholder meetings, sometimes generating surprising outcomes, although most shareholders have no voice. But all government agencies are subject to the “will of the people” in terms of legislative actions, budgetary or otherwise. All public agencies are expected to answer to the public for their actions, inactions or grievous errors. And the media directs much more attention to critiques of government policies or procedures than they do to corporate parallels.

A public sector alternative to the business model, or to privatization, is to create new public organizations that can compete with each other and with established government agencies—to deliver any of a broad array of services. Such organizations would operate much as a conglomerate does, but within the public umbrella. A Public Competition Model—Government versus Government—can harness the power of competition—much as competition with the private sector has motivated some government agencies to reinvent their services. Privatization advocates argue for the advantages of competition, but from an assumption of efficiency alone rather than values. Certainly competition can induce efficiency and innovation. But competition need not be limited to private sector vendors or even include them.

An alternative “Public Competition” model could harness the creative problem-solving energies of a motivated public workforce, but without ignoring or minimizing the necessary values of public sector service delivery. “Generic Agencies” A, B, C etc. could effectively compete—all the while maintaining government’s commitments to serve everyone and to do so fairly and ethically. Multiple agencies A, B, C... would be established to bid on virtually any service area. but against other such agencies, not the private sector—because the private sector, no matter what it might promise, will reflexively “cream” clienteles, or limit clients and services—in order to minimize costs and increase profits. A foundational assumption of the Public Competition model is the opportunity to bid on any services—against other such agencies and the private sector if necessary—without the
Ethical norms are emphasized more strongly in the public sector. The American Society for Public Administration’s Code of Ethics encompasses the breadth of such guidance, and public organizations are much more likely to hold their workforce to those standards. This is not to say that the private sector is inherently unethical, but simply that ethics is more apparent in training, practice and oversight across government organizations. The American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) advances the science, art, and practice of public administration. The Society affirms its responsibility to develop the spirit of responsible professionalism within its membership and to increase awareness and commitment to ethical principles and standards among all those who work in public service in all sectors. To this end, we, the members of the Society, commit ourselves to uphold the following principles:

1. Advance the Public Interest. Promote the interests of the public and put service to the public above service to oneself.
2. Uphold the Constitution and the Law. Respect and support government constitutions and laws, while seeking to improve laws and policies to promote the public good.
3. Promote democratic participation. Inform the public and encourage active engagement in governance. Be open, transparent and responsive, and respect all persons in their dealings with public organizations.
4. Strengthen social equity. Treat all persons with fairness, justice, and equality and respect individual differences, rights, and freedoms. Promote affirmative action and other initiatives to reduce unfairness, injustice, and inequality in society.
5. Fully Inform and Advise. Provide accurate, honest, comprehensive, and timely information and advice to elected and appointed officials and governing board members, and to staff members in your organization.
6. Demonstrate personal integrity. Adhere to the highest standards of conduct to inspire public confidence and trust in public service.
7. Promote Ethical Organizations: Strive to attain the highest standards of ethics, stewardship, and public service in organizations that serve the public.
8. Advance Professional Excellence: Strengthen personal capabilities to act competently and ethically and encourage the professional development of others.

Table 1. The American Society for Public Administration Code of Ethics (ASPA, 2022).

| Principle                                                                 | Description |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| 1. Advance the Public Interest.                                          | Promote the interests of the public and put service to the public above service to oneself. |
| 2. Uphold the Constitution and the Law.                                   | Respect and support government constitutions and laws, while seeking to improve laws and policies to promote the public good. |
| 3. Promote democratic participation.                                      | Inform the public and encourage active engagement in governance. Be open, transparent and responsive, and respect all persons in their dealings with public organizations. |
| 4. Strengthen social equity.                                              | Treat all persons with fairness, justice, and equality and respect individual differences, rights, and freedoms. Promote affirmative action and other initiatives to reduce unfairness, injustice, and inequality in society. |
| 5. Fully Inform and Advise.                                               | Provide accurate, honest, comprehensive, and timely information and advice to elected and appointed officials and governing board members, and to staff members in your organization. |
| 6. Demonstrate personal integrity.                                        | Adhere to the highest standards of conduct to inspire public confidence and trust in public service. |
| 7. Promote Ethical Organizations:                                         | Strive to attain the highest standards of ethics, stewardship, and public service in organizations that serve the public. |
| 8. Advance Professional Excellence:                                      | Strengthen personal capabilities to act competently and ethically and encourage the professional development of others. |

The public sector is primed to experiment with a government-only competitive mode, and the evidence underpinning that readiness is compelling: Public servants are often recognized for their exceptional achievements through thousands of award programs at all levels of government. Shared services organizational arrangements, already in place, are exemplars of an emerging willingness to “shop around” for more efficient service delivery contracts, but totally within an umbrella of public sector expectations. Public organizations that necessarily provide services beyond their narrowly stated missions have provided evidence of capacities to deliver services across a range of functional areas. The military, large school systems, public universities, hospitals, prisons and national parks deliver a range of services beyond their core missions, demonstrating the ability to operate a wide range of services. Their personnel manage housing, security, day care, food, health services, transportation, entertainment, libraries, sanitation, communications and many more services.

Challenge 2: How can we counter bureaucratic indifference?

Many recruits enter government with high ideals and good intentions to serve the public. They want to “make a difference,” to “give back,” to “dedicate their lives to improving the lives of others.” They often put their own lives on the line as police, military, emergency workers, firefighters and public health workers. Their sense of satisfaction, of contribution, of engagement is more important than the size of their paycheck.

But well-intentioned public servants too often accede to a culture of: “go along to get along,” “blow the whistle and blow your job,” and “whatever the boss says to do is OK.” That reluctance often leaves their agencies in the dark regarding mismanagement, corruption, and malfeasance.

The costs of willful organizational ignorance as a function of their protecting their jobs are, all too often, dramatic disasters. Bridges collapse from poor design or lack of maintenance. Pandemics spin out of control. Wars are launched without cause. Life-saving drugs languish in warehouses. Students are left to languish.

Countering that indifference requires giving bureaucrats much more involvement and discretion, or “buy in.” As participants in their agency’s problem-solving processes, service providers whose suggestions are welcomed in the improvement processes, as long-time observers whose accumulated knowledge can be invaluable, they are an organization’s “unpaid” consultants, especially when acting beyond their formal job descriptions. Participation and recognition help them consider the agency’s missions as their own, appreciate the need to open communications with clients, and encourage meaningful working relationships with those clients. That chemistry results in stronger service delivery.

In order to maximize the contributions and performance of all of their public servants, public organizations must recognize that:

- Important decisions require input from everyone (not just top managers) who can be important to
those decisions. If some mid-level bureaucrat or front-line employee knows why plans “A” and “B” will fail, but “C” will succeed, giving them a forum may well avoid major mistakes.

• Listening to pre-paid employees is much more economical than hiring well-paid consultants to improve processes that lead to performance.
• Because having access to information is necessary for making better decisions, that data must be available to bureaucrats who are involved in performance improvement problem solving. Effective data sharing must be regular, honest and clear.

Challenge #3: How do we convince the public that government is doing a good job, delivering on its promises?

One way to do so is to publish key performance indicators for the core functions enumerated above. Another way is to highlight best practice models and then incorporate them into data-driven performance improvement decisions that involve all stakeholders.

Public performance programs provide extensive compendia of defined and vetted Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) in all core service areas, based on recognized best practices, with regular updates. They typically utilize data “buried” in reports and databases. That data may automatically flow through to performance reports, but manual transfer of data is feasible if complicated programing is a barrier to use. The data, presented in robust graph and chart formats, can be used to benchmark performance against targets, past performance and the performance of similar organizations. It can drive problem-solving discussions among a broad range of stakeholders.

The development, publication and dissemination of service-specific data will surprise the public, the media and elected officials, but only if measurement is grounded in lessons learned across many successful programs, lessons communicating that:

Measures are Available.

• Key Performance Indicators, or KPIs, are based on recognized best practices
• New or modified measures are regularly published based on practice
• Users have full discretion on which measures to use or disregard
• Customized KPIs can be developed for any service area

Data Entry is Simple.

• Data can be transferred manually from existing reports; automatic transfers, while preferable, may require complex coding, thereby delaying implementation

• Valuable data, often collected but “buried” in reports and databases, can be “mined”
• Data-driven performance programs do not necessarily need dedicated staffing
• Exporting data to EXCEL-type spreadsheets provides easy accessibility for developing graphics and sharing data; customized databases may not provide that access

Performance Can Be Benchmarked Against:

• Targets
• Past performance
• Similar jurisdictions
• Best practices/Award-winning cities
• And then analyzed by a consortium of peer users sharing data and discussing ideas for improvement

Dashboards Can be Constructed, Updated, and Data Shared by:

• Using standard graph and chart formats
• Updating data regularly
• Exporting reports quickly to PDF, JPG, or PowerPoint formats

Discussion Can be Stimulated in Order to Solve Problems:

• By sharing data with stakeholders: managers, officials, all citizens
• By allowing authorized users to view a dashboard on their computer, tablet or smartphone
• By increasing analytical capacities of internal staff and/or contract for external experts

Public sector productivity improvement projects or strategies are not the simple “common sense” solutions typically posed by politicians, voters, businessmen and the media: “cut the fat” or “cutback management,” “economize” or “privatize,” “work harder” or “work smarter” or “business-like management.” If only such straightforward prescriptions were what public organizations needed then government’s efficiency would not be an issue. Simple, naive prescriptions, however, are not very useful. They are contrary to the complex, problem-solving processes government (or virtually any private organization) requires in order to address society’s most difficult-to-solve problems such as crime, pollution, transportation or education. Rather, the provision and improvement of services, as they actually operate in governments—or in the most profitable private sector firms—is a sophisticated and complex process.

Data-driven discussions should be informed by access to a database of the hundreds of awards programs that evaluate and recognize thousands of innovative public sector achievements on an objective basis. Those successes are routine, are widespread, and are evident at all levels
of government, but are not typically part of the dialog on performance improvement. The record shows that public sector professionals are frequently innovative, entrepreneurial and smart—using state-of-the-art methods to improve efficiency and quality, to achieve outcomes as promised. Their performance, in turn, makes it possible for individuals and the private sector to be more productive (Julnes & Holzer, 2022).

Public sector performance-enhancing models are available for the taking, but few jurisdictions avail themselves of those resources. Too many public managers assume their work, their services, their populations are a unique mixture. Although thousands of award-winning or benchmarked projects and programs are readily available on the Web, that knowledge base is an underutilized resource with a high payoff function.

Performance improvement exemplars are widespread within all governments, locally and globally. Examples in US federal, state and local agencies run counter to assumptions that public servants—or bureaucrats—care little about operational efficiency and effectiveness. Each year formal awards programs recognize hundreds of public sector achievements on an objective basis. Exemplary performance improvement programs are widely evident in the PRC as well: “Chinese public administration must necessarily be considered as a global model, indeed a set of reforms that might well suggest important lessons for both developing and developed countries. China’s economic development and poverty reduction, among other, have been viewed as remarkable successes.” (Holzer & Lu, 2016).

These are programs which address society’s most difficult problems: providing no-cost medical care for the indigent, unlogging court calendars, installing pollution and flood controls, expanding the supply of decent housing, increasing critical services to senior citizens, rehabilitating youthful and older offenders. Such problem-solving efforts are neither unique nor limited. They are easily and freely identifiable on the Web using applicable search terms such as: awards, best practices, innovations, cases, model programs. And once identified they are typically eager to share their models, their “lessons learned,” and even their manuals and systems.

We suggest the following systematic strategy in identifying and understanding those possibilities in the context of the criteria above.

Search for best practice cases over a multi-year period rather than confining a search to the past year or two. Search across boundaries and networks. Use a combination of the terms suggested below, or similar terminology (Table 2):

Download and evaluate a manageable set of no more than 10 best practices that promise to serve as adaptable models. Utilizing a term such as “award-winning” will narrow the number of possibilities to those that have been independently vetted. Similar terms are in the primary and secondary columns. The search can, of course, be combined with reference to a specific service or type of organization. The evaluation should draw upon the judgment of multiple staff and stakeholders, should extend to a thorough familiarity with each website, and ideally should involve a group meeting to reach a consensus on which programs to pursue in more detail as “real-time practical applications.” They often focus on five opportunities for performance improvement: (1) managing for quality, (2) developing human resources, (3) adapting technology, (4) building partnerships, and (5) measuring for performance.

Contact the program’s directors for further information to confirm that a best practice is still in practice. Many award-winning innovations are no longer in existence due to problems of organizational politics, budget cutbacks, leadership changes at the organizational or political levels, or a host of other factors. Opening up a conversation with the staff can lead to a deep and informed understanding of the potential applicability of that case. From our experience, suggested questions might be as follows and can help build a strong relationship with the program’s directors and staff as they understand that you are not only interested in emulating their work, but that you and they will continue to share lessons learned, acting as unpaid consultants to each other:

- How long did it take for the innovation to come about? What is the “back story” on this project?
- Is it still operating? Have there been performance issues?

| Primary | Secondary | Combined With |
|---------|-----------|---------------|
| Awards  | Award-winning | Government Agencies |
| Best Practice | Best | Departments Programs |
| Cases  | Case Studies | Systems Nonprofits + Specific Services |
| Excellence | Excellence, Exemplars, Examples | Quality Management |
| Honors | Model Programs | Government Performance, Public Performance |
| Innovations | Recognized | Quality Management |
| Outstanding Performance | Top Ranked | Recognized |
| Top Ranked | Top Rated | Services |
• What data is available as to its success?
• What are the most important lessons learned? Have there been constraints or dilemmas confronting key decision-makers?
• Beyond what is posted to the website, can you share the application that led to its award-winning designation? News articles?
• Is there a manual you can share? A training video?
• Are you available for further questions?

Overall, best practices are a valuable, low investment means of identifying and adapting performance-enhancing innovations. They are relatively easy to find, but there is little evidence that such a search process is widely utilized. Best practice research is not systematically taught or practiced. Public officials rarely look for such knowledge beyond the boundaries of their own cities or states, and seldom across international boundaries. Yet the benefit/cost ratio for such efforts is undoubtedly considerable whether measured in terms of savings or quality improvements.

As a related opportunity, how do we convince elected officials that performance programs save money and stretch resources? Political support is necessary for performance programs to endure. Many have not survived changes in administrations as the agenda of elected officials is replaced by their immediate successors, but without due consideration of systemic management innovations that would continue to benefit any administration.

And even if they do survive a political succession, too many performance programs publish too much data without identifying or emphasizing savings. Public performance programs must “market” themselves by emphasizing savings as elected officials are particularly responsive to evidence that budgets and taxes are being controlled on their watch.

Underscoring outcomes as stories of success is equally important. Raw data pasted into a report will not suffice. Governments should be telling stories with their data. If an agency is doing well, they should explain why the numbers support that. If it is below expectations, the audience should know that too, and why. Presenting data without interpretation risks misinterpretation by the public, its elected officials and the media. Performance programs must present stories that improved outcomes—especially in terms of quality—noticeably improve the lives of citizens.

Another powerful way to counter stereotypes is by recognizing and communicating that public service is dangerous service. Despite its perceived generous benefits and job security, a public service career can often be challenging and even dangerous. Public servants willing place themselves in the path of danger, sacrificing their lives; many, many others risk their health as nurses and healthcare workers (10,000 + verbal or physical attacks reported annually), social workers (one-third report being physically assaulted each year), and teachers (who suffer about 100,000 violent crimes a year) (BLS, 2021).

Challenge #4: How can we encourage and protect bureaucratic resisters?

Bureaucracy is, by its nature, averse to dissent. Orders flow from the top, and top-level officials do not want to be embarrassed or contradicted. Yet the reflexive suppression of dissent may result in tragic and expensive errors that might have been avoided if concerned bureaucrats had quietly been empowered to share their apprehensions.

Bureaucrats want to act ethically. While many take issue with their organizations’ leadership and policies, some few are moved to dissent in the public interest. Those are the few who must not be suppressed, but rather should be heard. Those are the “canaries in the bureaucratic mine,” alerting the leadership, the media and the public to the largely unintended consequences of policies that were once well intentioned, but are now harming individuals, groups or the general population. Bureaucrats may also be alerting the public, and its media and legislative surrogates, to unethical, illegal, destructive behaviors of their superiors.

Resisters are keepers of the organizational conscience, of the oaths of office, or the ethical standards that drew them to public service. They help public bureaucracies protect the public from cancer-causing air and water, from toxic chemicals, from corrupt behaviors. They do so by quietly building the evidence, forcing independent reviews, meeting with like-minded staff, earnestly talking to their superiors about incompetence and malfeasance. If necessary, they take the risk of blowing the whistle, leaking information as to criminality and publicly confronting higher officials. They are a resource to be appreciated, not punished.

Resisters are particularly important in countering “Management by Whim”? The Cuban Missile Crisis was precipitated in 1962 by Russian Premier Nikita Krushchev’s idiosyncratic decision, on a whim, to station nuclear missiles in Cuba as a deterrent to the US. Krushchev reportedly formulated his plan while on vacation on the Black Sea coast, but without a formal, strategic decision process that would have included multiple participants who could have diagnosed and discouraged the initiative as unrealistic and dangerous. Much the same problem of “management by whim” has characterized Russian President Vladimir Putin’s disastrous decision to invade Ukraine in 2002.
US President John F. Kennedy’s careful decision-making brought the Cuban Missile Crisis to a safe, enduring conclusion. Seeking balanced, informed advice, he convened the “ExCom” of cabinet-level advisors to stop a seemingly inevitable rush to nuclear war. The lesson, often ignored, is that effective leadership comes not from the gut but from the brain. The reality is that presidents who have headed off conflicts or managed complex situations have done so with great respect for professional advice and an openness to alternative points of view. Entering the mid-21st Century, Kennedy’s successor, Joseph Biden, is carefully confronting a similar nuclear danger in the context of a war in Ukraine, but one that is a legacy of ungrounded decision making by his predecessor Donald Trump, and very likely Trump’s “partner” Vladimir Putin. Trump is unparalleled in having brought a distinct impatience and distrust of professionals to the Oval Office. His uninformed, unexamined and unrealistic decisions have produced a litany of slowly developing disasters: the acceleration, rather than deceleration, of climate change; abuse, rather than care, for migrant children in government custody at the southern border; more missiles and nuclear bombs in North Korea; pandemic mismanagement and more.

“Management by Whim” is neither a game nor a movie. This is an existential situation in which a President, Governor, or Mayor imagines he or she is shrewder than anyone else, that his gut-level decisions are more powerful than those of his predecessors or rivals. In truth, such a leader is not inquisitive enough to seek professional advice or to open decisions to proficient scrutiny.

Public administration degrees and in-service training need to equip public servants with a “tool kit” of professional options for countering organizational missteps, blunders, oversights and miscalculations. Bureaucrats need to feel supported across a range of options that will protect the public while enabling their agencies to deliver services as promised.

Options for quiet resistance to questionable instructions or commands include:

**Professionalism**

Professionalism as resistance hinges on the assumption that to violate one’s profession would be to violate the responsibilities of one’s position. Management may sometimes, however, ask the doctor, nurse, lawyer, accountant and the countless other professionals within the bureaucracy to conduct themselves against their professional expertise for political or selfish reasons. Professionals, by focusing on doing their jobs with skill and integrity, can keep policy implementation on track; maintaining a professional orientation may resist whatever inappropriate actions some superiors have in mind.

**Building a case**

A solid case built on experiences, notes, documents, and records, is critical to any resistance or whistleblowing effort. Being proactive with data collection, data distribution, and speaking “truth to power” can build a reputation of thoroughness. Even though digital information is common, a resistor still ought to consider the strategy of finding print evidence that proves an abuse. Hard documents facilitate the possibility of using other strategies, such as leaking information, lawsuits, or cultivating outside support.

**Persistence**

Persistence is a necessary strategy given how long some resistance efforts might take, especially concerning legal matters. Persistence is a strategic characteristic in almost all resistance efforts, and a necessary characteristic at that. Persistence can make a moment into a movement -- a movement that can change an administration or the culture of an organization.

**Making the data usable**

For a resistance effort to be successful, the resistor should put the data into usable, visible, and powerful formats. Simplifying the data is a meaningful step in changing organizations or behaviors. Graphic presentations help management better understand the concerns, abuses and potential remedies. Graphic data makes resistance efforts easier as spreadsheets and tables are not necessarily salient to the public, the media, much of the workforce and elected officials. And data must be communicated to relevant stakeholders in appropriate meetings, a task more amendable to graphics than to spreadsheets.

**Completing the data with stories**

The data is much more effective if there is a story behind the data. Data can work in calling attention to a problem, but a story can add to its impact. Eyes can glaze over when talking about data, even easily readable data. Cases highlight the importance of “the story” behind resistance. Each data point should be complemented by an anecdote: Cancer rates with vignettes of individual cancer patients; recidivism rates with sketches of individuals in the correctional system; murder rates with the tragedies of individual victims. Then statistics can tell the larger story. While the profiteering or abuses by individuals may be a “drop in the bucket” of bureaucracy, they have real consequences for real people outside of bureaucracy. A bureaucratic resister must be able to tell those stories within the bureaucracy.

**Discretion**

The bureaucrat almost always has discretion. Reality is complex, and rules may shape how individuals respond, but
there is always “wiggle-room.” Students may receive special attention from teachers. Police may or may not initiate actions after pulling a car over. Foreign service officers may arbitrarily disapprove applications. But such bureaucrats, wishing to resist unacceptable orders, can attempt to exercise discretion. When considering discretion, the bureaucrat should ask the following questions to him or herself: Can I “recruit” colleagues to resist and widen the discretion resistance? Am I willing to maneuver around the rules to prevent bad policy and abuses?

By the Book

“By the Book” is when the resistor follows each rule to the letter without the usual cutting of corners that may occur for reasons of efficiency. Perhaps ironically, “By the Book” is resistance by doing one’s job “correctly.” The point is that “the book,” with its strict and hardly read rules, can be used to slow processes and halt unjust policy. “By the Book” can also be powerful in meetings in which the resistor can point specifically to where a rule conflicts with the supervisor’s policy initiatives. Of course, this can create tensions, but it is difficult to argue against. Rules are rules! Of course, this strategy is contingent on the resistor having a thorough knowledge of the manuals, rules, regulations and policies of his or her organization.

Recommending action

While resisting policy is important, providing a meaningful policy alternative or modification to address the problem is even more important. One may think this is a simple “X is bad, the policy recommendation is to not do X,” but there are almost always multiple policy options available to decision makers. The resistor should have a meaningful set if policy alternatives available for discussions with supervisors, superiors and elected officials. A simple “Nuclear energy is unsafe, we must abolish all of our nuclear plants” will not readily win much support or change the industry. However, a resistor taking issue with safety guidelines at a nuclear power plant can attempt to advocate for strong safety regulations in more concrete forms, such as better safety equipment, procedures, or additions.

Recruiting allies

Allies can be found in almost all places, from friends at work, to family, to outside organizations. Allies can artificially create leverage in a situation and act as advocate on behalf of changes in policies and procedures. Allies can provide “cover” from angry superiors. Recruiting allies broadens the range of action for the lone resistor to operate and prevents the individual from being labeled as a “lone zealot.” Often, when an abuse is being perpetuated by an organization, the lone resistor finds that they are not the only ones who notice. If a resistor can effectively tap into the concerns of his or her colleagues and see where they stand on the alleged issue, a coalition might form.

Confronting the issue directly with the person involved

An obvious and initial step is to confront the issue with the person most involved in the injustice. There are both practical and altruistic reasons for doing this. Practically speaking, the injustice may be perpetuated by the individual because they may believe nobody is noticing, or that they will not be caught. While formally “catching” them and punishing them may be difficult, confronting them directly about the injustice can break down the defensive barriers they may have constructed concerning the act. Now that people know, the individual may stop the act all together. Another practical reason is categorical. If the resistor confronts the individual about the injustice and the injustice persists, then it clarifies the issue as being purposeful, as opposed to accidental. A last practical reason for confronting the issue directly with the person is that it also can provide legal cover in the forms of “building a case” that may go as far as a legal confrontation. The injustice may be happening accidentally, and merely informing the individual of the wrongdoing may stop it altogether.

Alerting the agency

Some agencies have hotlines for employees to alert the organization about potential abuses, inefficiencies, or criminal activity. Hotlines typically also aim to maintain anonymity for the resistor. While a simple form of resistance, it does create a record of the incident and can be referenced later if the situation were to escalate. Hotlines can also be coupled with persistence. A single call may equate to little change, but repeated calls about various abuses over the course of months or even years can elicit meaningful responses from the organization. A powerful step a resistor should consider taking is the utilization of the Office of Inspector General (OIG). The office is built specifically for dissenters and whistleblowers who need to voice concerns and complaints about abuse and fraud in their organizations. It is their natural ally. The OIG will help facilitate lawsuits, and investigations have become more supportive of whistleblowers. Many departments and agencies have some sort of OIG as a lightning rod for dissent.

Transferring offices (or not)

A relatively passive form of resistance is to ask for a transfer to a different office or department. This transfer can slow or block the implementation of abusive policy if the resistor is central to the policy implementation. Transferring offices is often granted given the difficulty of firing public servants. Transferring is also symbolic of free-market concepts of “voting with your feet.” If a new policy is launched,
but staff signal their resistance by requesting transfers, then it is a signal to management and executives that the policy may be objectionable. While transferring offices may be a form of resistance, so is purposely not transferring offices. There are unique advantages to “staying put” in one’s position as long as possible during a resistance effort. The position may provide unique information and access to special nuances of the abuse. Management, knowing this, may aim to forcibly transfer the resistor from such a position. Secondly, staying in one’s position can be emboldening to subordinates and serve as a general morale booster to those who may wish to join the resistance efforts.

Resigning quietly

Resigning as a form of resistance operates on the notion that to implement policy, politicians and management need experts on the ground who know the situation. If the experts were to resign, policy implementation might become difficult.

Sounding the alarm

The central tenet of bureaucratic resistance is to do the right thing. If quiet professionalism is not effective, then bureaucrats who are committed to correcting policies should consider a set of public facing options—leaking information, refusing illegal orders, openly criticizing superiors and formal whistleblowing—with the associated career risks that they entail.

Leaking information

A classic, and potent, avenue of bureaucratic resistance is to leak information to the press or supporting organizations. Public scrutiny is important to most government functioning and is considered a normative value by most developed democratic standards. While the danger may be high when leaking information to the public, the benefits can add a multiplying effect to the resistance effort. “Ghostwriting,” typically by an insider, is the act of remaining anonymous while using the on-the-job information and access one possesses to write inflammatory exposures of the organization. “Ghostwriting” is an active exercise in which the individual aims to stay under cover while purposefully highlighting the abuses in question. This tactic is similar to “leaking information,” but with the added step of crafting the message, not merely supplying the content.

Refusing illegal orders

Illegal orders or criminal behavior on behalf of an individual or an organization is particularly heinous and ought to be resisted. Conducting illegal activity is typically considered morally wrong, and if the action is brought to justice the bureaucrats involved can be legally liable. Bureaucrats should not be organizational automatons who unquestionably carry out what they are told to do. They must be conscious of what the orders ask of them and how they can affect the law, people, and themselves. Resisting such behavior can contribute to the legitimacy of the resistance movement. While resistance that is concerned with policy differences can lessen legitimacy simply because the resistor does not “agree” with the policy or its implementation, resisting orders that ask the bureaucrat to conduct illegal activity, or bringing to light criminal behavior that a coworker has committed, is something that many people would see as desirous of supporting.

Directly/openly blasting superiors

Going on the offensive can grab headlines, establish more of a sense of sincerity, and unequivocally state who is to blame, for what problem, and for the immorality of it all. This quickly creates an “us versus them” mentality that becomes obvious. Becoming loud and direct with one’s criticism also can elevate the individual to a “celebrity status” in which the news follows him or her, what they say, and what may happen to them. The resistor can become the spokesperson for the issue. For example, if the celebrity resistor is terminated for his or her opposition, the news will probably report it in terms favorable to the resistor.

Formally blowing the whistle

Whistleblowing is a collection of strategies that generally involve going outside of the organization, voicing concerns loudly to the public, and often incorporating the legislature or other organizations. Formal whistleblowing can take years to have its full impact.

Challenge #5: What do top level appointees need to be able to run government competently?

Relatively few public managers have Master of Public Administration (MPA) degrees; some have a Master of Public Policy (MPP) degree, but that curriculum does not typically touch on the management skills necessary to implement the policy decisions for which MPP graduates are being prepared to place on the public agenda. Perhaps only several hundred thousand MPA/MPP degree holders actively managing the public sector in the US, out of a public service workforce of tens of millions. The ratio in the PRC may well be less robust as MPA degree programs are more recent; the ratio of MPA degree holders to public employees may, however, be most substantial in South Korea with its hundreds of programs and smaller public workforce. Nevertheless, across all nations, public programs and agencies are managed by professionals such as doctors, lawyers and engineers with licenses or certifications, but not with credentials as public managers. They are
technically competent in their narrow specializations, but often completely lost in the halls of bureaucracy.

Top-level managers, new to government or promoted into management, often acknowledge that this is the “toughest job I ever had.” The agency’s default is more often experiential “on-the-job training,” but seldom the comprehensive training they need from Day One. Few people, if any, can manage a government intuitively.

Some certificate programs, such as Certified Public Manager (CPM) program in the US, are meant to bridge this gap based on the assumption that executive jobs are complex and differ from the private sector in many important respects. As a “mini-MPA,” CPM and other certificates offer participants a solid framework on public management theory and practice, typically (National Certified Public Manager Consortium, 2021):

Financial Analysis in Public Administration:

- Providing managers with an understanding of fiscal policies and public finances, budget formulation, basic political economy, and administrative transparency.
- Public Financial Management. This course provides the accounting tools for analyzing annual financial reports.
- Budget and Resource Acquisition. This course focuses on an understanding of the budgeting process (planning, formulation, evaluation).
- Political Economy and Public Administration. This course provides an overview of economic principles for decision making in public administration.
- Administrative Transparency. This course focuses on the dimensions of administrative transparency to assess the tools available to public administrators to achieve transparency.

Formulating and Evaluating Strategy in Public Administration:

- Teaching managers about the public policy cycle within public organizations: strategies involved in public policy design, implementation and evaluation; the selection of public personnel; and the intergovernmental relations.
- Strategic Planning and Implementation. This course will provide students with planning techniques (stakeholder analysis, strengths and weaknesses analysis) for strategic policy implementation.
- Policy Evaluation. This course will provide students with an overview of the public policy process, paying special attention to the tools for policy assessment.
- Human Resource Management. This course offers an overview of human resource management through an examination of recruitment, screening, interviewing, and selection process.
- Performance Measurement and Improvement. This course examines techniques, best practices and strategies for public performance measurement. Students will explore best practices that highlight the successes and challenges of performance measurement implementation.
- Intergovernmental relations. This course analyzes the constraints involved in intergovernmental relations during the policy process as well as the strategies used by public managers to mitigate the effects of interagency networking.

Managerial Development:

- Developing managerial skills for public administration: problems faced by public managers when trying to achieve excellence in leadership through diversity, accountability and collaborative networking.
- Leadership and Diversity. This course addresses the responsibility of public managers to create legal, ethical and diverse work environments.
- Ethics and Accountability. This course focuses on administrative ethics to examine accountability problems facing public administrators and its impact on the organization.
- Social and Organizational Network Analysis. This course introduces the concept of “network analysis” for public management. It offers an overview of how managers focus on the internal and external environments and move on to new notions of communication, consultation, collaboration and negotiation with other organizations.

Analytical Tools:

- Providing managers with the analytical techniques for policy design and implementation. Students analyze information systems in public administration as well as learn basic statistics for management practice.
- Information Systems and Public Administration. This course will introduce students to information systems in place within public organizations.
- Survey Research. This course teaches students how to create surveys that will help public managers identify preferences of citizens as clients and their satisfaction with government performance.
- Statistics for Public Managers. This course offers an overview of basic statistics public managers could use for informed policy decisions and public program evaluation.
- E-government. The course examines the importance of e-government as a management tool for improving organizational performance.

The five challenges presented above are illustrative of the complexity that public managers must master. They do not comprise a comprehensive perspective, but are simply indicative of the broad, imaginative rethinking of public administration that is necessary going forward.
Table 3. Executive leadership competencies.

As an alternative to an MPA or mini-MPA, particularly for executive level managers who are pressed for time from the very first day on the job, and who may well be confronting difficult policy and implementation scenarios, complex human resource and financial situations, and an unfamiliar organizational terrain, a set of recognized competencies can be made available on the Web via a wide range of connected devices, including smart phones. That framework of Executive Leadership Competencies (Table 3), distilled as a meta analysis from a broad range of public, nonprofit and private sector studies, includes seven necessary competencies (Illiash, 2013):

Competency 1: Personal Fundamentals
This group of competencies is comprised of those individual skills, traits, and abilities that serve as a foundation—a necessary prerequisite—for success in all other categories of public leadership competencies.

Competency 2: Leading Change
This group of competencies involves the ability to bring about strategic change, both within and outside the organization, to meet organizational goals. It focuses on the ability to establish an organizational vision and to implement it in a continuously changing environment (Based on executive core qualification (ECQ) Leading Change).

Competency 3: Leading People
This module describes a group of the so-called “people-oriented” competencies—team building, managing conflict, leveraging diversity, motivating, developing others—which are so critical to successful leadership that sometimes they are considered synonymous with it.

Competency 4: Results Driven
This group of competencies involves the ability to meet organizational goals of high performance and customer satisfaction. By providing public-sector leaders with the ability to apply technical knowledge, risk assessment and problem analysis, it enables them to make decisions that produce high-quality results (Based in part on ECQ Results Driven).

Competency 5: Process Driven
This module focuses on a group of competencies comprising the “task” domain of leadership, competencies considered fundamental in managing day-to-day operations of public agencies. These competencies include: decision-making, problem solving, application of technical knowledge, program/project management.

Competency 6: Resource Acumen
This group of competencies is required to carry out structural responsibilities related to the organization—budgeting and financial management, human resources management, as well as information technology management.

Competency 7: Building Coalitions
This module includes a group of competencies that address internal and external cooperation and coalition building necessary to achieve common goals.

They follow from the rich research-based dialog that is grounded in peer-reviewed journal articles in such journals as the Chinese Public Administration Review. Practice often lags research, leading us to conclude that the ultimate challenge is to distill the published journal research into action items that will attract and hold the attention not just of academic students of public administration, but of the far larger potential audience of public sector practitioners who are charged with “delivering as promised.”

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