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Introduction

Among the many admirable aims of the environmental movement, the one that strikes me as most useful to those in public services is captured by the motto, “Think globally, act locally.” In a public services career spanning more than 35 years, I have had a chance to look at public service systems in the Americas, Europe and Africa. I have been forcibly struck by the need to give substantial weight to the local political and cultural context of a particular system. You ignore a genuine understanding of these features at your peril: You, the public services administrator or elected official, must be seen to listen and pay attention to local priorities. In other words, act locally. At the same time, my experience in South Africa and Canada (which in key ways face vastly different challenges) and elsewhere is that there are some major global economic, human and social drivers that all politicians and public service administrators need to take account of in their engagement with their citizens. Think globally.

In *Unlocking Public Value*, Marty Cole and Greg Parston offer public services practitioners a unique tool to help them capture the mix of goals or outcomes, some reflecting local, some global, concerns, and measure performance in attaining these outcomes. Providing a framework and step-by-step process for defining these outcomes is one of the key achievements of the book. Since nearly all meaningful outcomes come at a cost to taxpayers, the measuring of outcomes occurs in the context of tracking not just costs, but cost-effectiveness as well.

Following are some of the critical questions that I have found over the years underlie successful approaches to delivering public services around the world:

- How do you improve the quality of public services?
- How do you hold down the tax bill for public services, as few societies willingly agree to pay more?

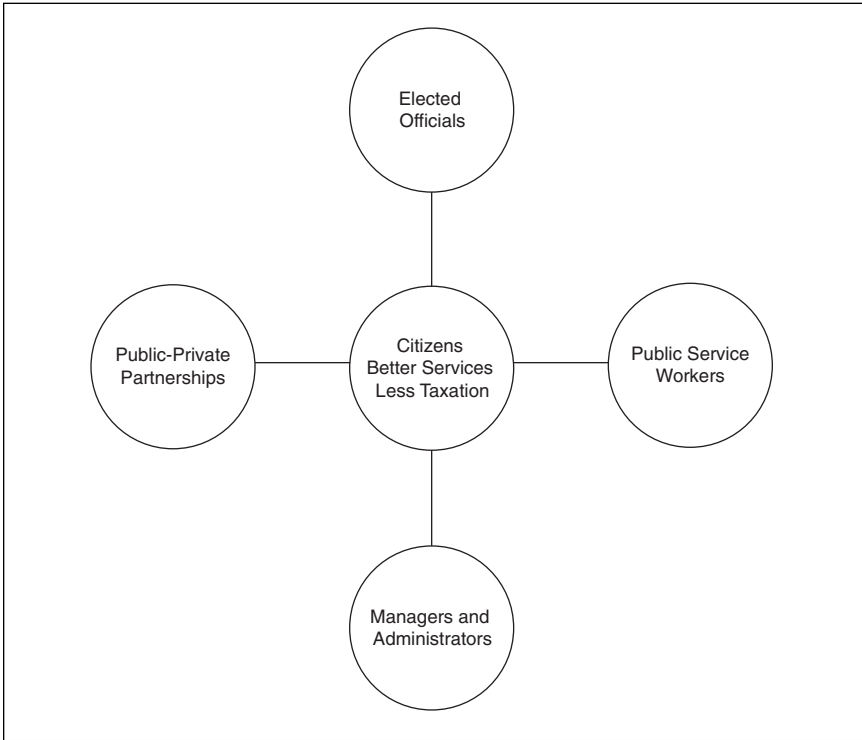
- How do you achieve value for money that is credible to citizens?
- What role could the private sector play to add skills and experience?
- How do you involve public service workers without allowing their needs to overdominate?

Citizen-Centric

Implicit in these questions is the goal of putting the citizen at the center of all efforts to provide and improve upon public services. Most public service leaders and administrators at least give lip service to putting the citizen first. However, it is frustrating, but not surprising, to find that competing interests vie with those of citizens time and again in locales around the world. Attempts to maintain the public service status quo among various interests too often has the effect of slighting citizens' needs, despite the best of stated intentions.

A model for public services centered on the citizen is depicted in simplified form by the following diagram. As indicated in the above questions, the citizen wants more and better public services without bearing a greater tax burden. Those desires drive dynamic relationships with the other four public service "players" described below, including elected officials, managers and administrators, public service workers and public-private sector partnerships. In many cases these four groups also interact with each other at various times, of course, but I have resisted the temptation to create a cat's cradle of criss-crossing lines and arrows.

Politicians and managers and administrators must establish trust in their leadership if they are to succeed in effectively providing public value. Time and again I have found in different societies that politicians and managers struggle to establish this trust. Politicians frequently want quick results and pay less attention to long-term needs. Managers fail to accept the real pressure the politicians work under. Successful public service strategies need to



incorporate both of these aspects so that there can be an integrated political/managerial response to the needs of the citizen. Politicians and managers need to take the time and effort to involve local citizens in setting goals and clearly set out the strategies that will be followed to achieve those goals.

Addressing the concerns of public service workers and related groups in the context of a citizen-focused approach to providing public services is one of the biggest challenges facing public service leaders. In Canada, where most public service systems are regarded as working fairly well, it has been my experience that some systems staff, accustomed to the strong influence of trade unions, have resisted the transition to a more citizen-centric approach. And in South Africa the public sector is struggling with

extending the quantity and quality of public services previously only available to the white minority to all South Africans, while at the same time dramatically increasing the public service employment opportunities to all citizens.

Public-private sector partnerships are increasingly being embraced by public service providers in many parts of the world. Although the trend is most pronounced in the United Kingdom, it is clearly spreading as the public sector taps the skills of the private sector and melds them with the knowledge base of the public sector in order to enhance public value. The partnership approach is not without difficulties, however. Despite the United States' deserved reputation as the leading proponent of private sector efficiencies and growth, there has been a failure in the competition for procurement of public services in several cases. Many major public service contracts are repeatedly granted to the same parties at federal and state levels. More emphasis is needed in the United States and elsewhere on encouraging competitive bidding in order to hasten the adoption of public-private sector partnerships.

Over the next several years it is a virtual certainty that the pressure in public services to provide greater public value for the money being spent will only increase. *Unlocking Public Value* is an important step in addressing what the authors refer to as this "value squeeze." Applying the concept of private sector shareholder value to the public sector, with citizens substituting for shareholders in broad terms, gives the public services participant a fresh approach to the challenges he or she faces. At the same time it keeps citizen concerns at the center of attempts to balance social outcomes and cost-effectiveness. And that is right where citizen concerns belong, regardless of whether you are thinking globally or acting locally.

Sir Andrew Foster
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1992–2003