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What have we learned about public administrators? The Kettering Foundation makes three assumptions about what a healthy democracy requires: responsible citizens who can make sound choices about their future; communities of citizens acting together to address common problems; and institutions with public legitimacy that contribute to strengthening society. Research in the Public-Government program area addresses the third assumption.

Democracies require institutions that recognize the need for citizen involvement and strengthen civil society while enjoying the confidence of citizens. Unfortunately, many of our major institutions do not enjoy the public’s confidence. Public administrators who see little value in engaging citizens are distanced from a public that holds high levels of cynicism and negative perceptions about government. This gap between public administrators and citizens threatens our democratic system of governance because it results in a lack of citizen participation.

This article pulls together insights from public engagement efforts to bridge the gap between the public and the administrative institutions of government. By insights, we mean the cross-cutting ideas that we see repeatedly. Within this research, we share experiences and perspectives public administrators have about “key democratic practices,” such as naming and framing issues in public terms, making decisions through public deliberation, and implementing decisions through public acting. To this end, the foundation has entered into a number of joint-learning agreements with public administrators and researchers in this arena; this report is a summary of research completed during the past three years.

Traditionally, administrators carry out the policy decisions made by elected representatives. However, there is considerable leeway within policies that require public administrators who are not elected by the public to make substantive decisions. For instance, environmental regulators on site make local decisions within a larger policy framework that require judgment. This creates a tension in the role of public administrators and suggests the need to pay attention to the relationship between this branch of government and the public.

The gap between public administrators and citizens is defined by factors related to the way public administrators approach their work. First, for nearly 20 years, public administrators treated the public as customers, viewing citizens as a receiver of services rather than a participant in democracy. This approach defined the citizen as a receiver of services rather than a participant in democracy. Unfortunately, this increased the gap within the relationship rather than closed it. Second, public administrators are results driven and view themselves as decision makers, thus they are unaccustomed to...
turning to the public for help. Third, they are nonpartisan by virtue of their professional standards and are often uncomfortable with the responsibility of deciding between competing values expressed in policy disputes. Finally, administrators are most comfortable when guided by rules and structures and measure their success by compliance, as opposed to situational flexibility.

Methods to evaluate public engagement are still in their infancy. Therefore, experimenting with public engagement puts public administrators in unfamiliar territory as they struggle with how to make it work. Deliberative practices can be confusing to administrators who are accustomed to crisp, measurable outcome evaluations and interesting technical problem solving. The depth of this problem is illustrated by the difficulties caused when agencies and administrators are confronted with issues of shared control, time constraints, and entrenchment in traditional ways of making decisions.

Insights

The foundation’s studies, both those continuing and those completed, include work by public administrators and other researchers. Mike Pompili works with public health directors in Ohio to address environmental health issues, such as air quality. During foundation workshops, Pat Bonner reflects on her experience in public engagement with environmental regulators at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The National League of Cities works with major cities across the U.S. and has studied democratic governance. Alice Diebel interviewed public administrators in Michigan about the value they place on public deliberation. Michael Briand helped a city government in Longmont, Colorado, engage the public in land-use planning. The Harwood Institute completed three case studies about city administrators who are experimenting with new approaches to public engagement.

These researchers and practitioners help us better understand the gap between the public and public administrators. The key insights from these fellow travelers have to do with defining the nature of public engagement, the timing of engagement efforts, the structure of relationships with the public, and between government branches, and the means to determine the level of success or failure of the engagement.

Defining Public Engagement

Public engagement means many things to many people. Mike Pompili’s research revealed the public hearing process is the standard approach used by many public administrators. In contrast, The Harwood Institute reports that in communities like Clark County, Nevada, it means an ethic of relating to citizens as partners rather than as customers. The way public engagement is framed can change the relationship between administrators and citizens and influence the nature of the interaction and its relationship to the work of citizens and government.

For some public administrators, public engagement is defined as a democratic principle. They believe strongly in the right of the public to have a voice in government policy. However, this value is an ideal that is seldom realized in large part because of the relationship between the public and the
government. Foundation research shows public administrators have had mixed success with public engagement. The National League of Cities reports public administrators feel they work hard but are “personally abused and maligned” by self-interested citizens. The Harwood Institute finds public administrators recognize the need for better approaches to public involvement but feel little public demand for “better” participation. Without the public demand for involvement, government is left to define the terms of engagement.

Further research shows that most often, administrators attempt to engage the public because they must. Either they are meeting a regulatory requirement or they realize that in order to do their job effectively, they need public support. However, the public recognizes when public participation is intended just to seek buy-in and the effort usually ends in failure. The actual community problem becomes secondary to the engagement when the focus is on participation for participation’s sake. Without identifying the real need for citizen engagement, citizens are brought into the process late, leading to public anger and greater distance from government when people believe decisions have already been made.

Timing

The issue of timing continues to be a major problem for administrators who seek to involve citizens in the political process. Implementing these democratic practices requires lengthy amounts of time to be effective. But policy timelines seldom match the public’s awareness of the problem or its capacity to solve it. It is important to engage the public early in order to allow space for the issue to be named in more public terms. However, early and extended involvement carries the risk of wearing out the public.

One of the concerns public administrators express about public deliberation is how to time the effort so it is most valuable. For example, Michael Briand believes that public forums about growth held in Longmont, Colorado, did not adequately address the long-term impact of the plan the government was discussing. Briand concludes that the issue could have been framed to express greater urgency and severity, which might have increased participation. In the minds of the public, the tensions associated with growth were too far in the distance to trigger the public naming required to bring sufficient participation.

However, if public administrators wait too long to engage citizens, they can face an outraged public. Alice Diebel, in her study, finds that administrators perceive the public as emotional, uninformed, and self-interested. Unfortunately, that perspective is built on encounters with a public that has been brought into the decision-making process too late to have the opportunity to fully grasp the issue or participate in the choice.

Earlier timing is used by some in the EPA when beginning a hazardous waste cleanup. Pat Bonner reports that a community assessment can raise regulator awareness of a community’s history, cultural norms, and relationships. Even a quick assessment can provide a better process with a clearer purpose. Developing relationships through the assessment process builds greater promise of public participation and better timing of these efforts.

Structuring Relationships

How should relationships be structured so the timing is more effective? Public administrators are concerned about how the public “fits” within the administrative structures. Both The Harwood Institute and Mike Pompili report finding that public administrators need the support of upper-level administrators in public engagement work. They also believe it is important to be clear about the goals of public engagement when they delegate these activities to their staff. Both of these concerns reflect the constraints of bureaucratic structures. Such structures can create barriers to public engagement. Pat Bonner’s experiences indicate the perceived barriers limit the creative potential of public engagement staff to design innovative public involvement activities. For example, most of the laws the EPA implements require review and comment or public hearings, and nothing more. Innovative processes require an entrepreneurial spirit with staff and administrators willing to take risks. These risks leave them vulnerable for uncertain outcomes when they stray from the established regulations set in policy.

Key insights have to do with defining the nature of public engagement, the timing of engagement efforts, the structure of relationships with the public and between government branches, and the means to determine the level of success or failure of the engagement.

One way to succeed within the existing structures of government agencies is for a strong staff person to take the lead and incorporate democratic practices into the work of the organization. Mike Pompili calls this person a “champion.” The Harwood Institute also finds that, “In each public agency we visited, high-ranking staff sets the tone for how the public agency relates to the public.” A champion in the agency can create successful examples of citizen engagement that incorporate a new relationship between the agency and the public.

Of course, the obvious relationship that needs building is between administrators and citizens, and deliberative politics is critical for that relationship to occur. However, one of the most interest-
ing findings in Mike Pompili’s research is the desire public administrators have to build relationships with elected officials. He notes that by convening deliberative forums, and inviting elected officials into the process, the relationship between the agency and the elected official can be strengthened. This relationship can “allow for future interaction on the agency’s main issues of budget, community initiatives and responding to their constituency needs.” Improved relationships with elected officials in the complex relationships between government and citizens are significant to understanding the “whole story” of deliberative politics. Helping administrators understand what they can expect from citizens and giving citizens the space to engage the issue can lead to better relationships between the groups.

How administrators evaluate their success in these relationships and structures is the final challenge.

Expectations and Evaluation
Evaluation and standards are major sticking points for agencies seeking more and better public engagement. For example, Michael Briand’s research reveals public administrators were committed to gaining early public input on growth planning. However, these administrators were disappointed in the kind of input they got from the public. They had hoped for greater detail. This finding suggests public administrators lack an understanding of the public’s role, in part because of their training. Pat Bonner tells us that scientists-turned-administrators are uncomfortable with the uncertainty of making complex decisions on tight deadlines. The scientific process stands in contrast to reaching decisions that incorporate public values. They are trained to work until the science is “right” rather than working through messy collaborative processes that attempt to make choices that more people can live with.

Similarly, Mike Pompili, Alice Diebel, and The Harwood Institute all report public administrators sincerely desire quality public engagement but lack the tools to demonstrate the effort is worthwhile. Furthermore, administrators who experiment to achieve better engagement can put their jobs at risk. Trying new things can produce uncertain outcomes that might affect traditional evaluation measures, such as cost-benefit analysis.

Conclusions
The insights from this research have significant bearing on future foundation work. We continue to struggle with the question of how agencies that engage in this work can evaluate their practices. Narrow evaluation standards do not work well when a public with diverse interests engage together. In these situations, specific outcome questions go unanswered resulting in a poor evaluation—not what a professional wants! Therefore, in order to properly evaluate public engagement work, public administrators need to change their questions and adopt a civic-learning style. Civic learning occurs when administrators examine how their actions and behaviors affect the larger community not in terms of financial costs and the achievement of predetermined goals, but rather in terms of the civic effort, that is, who got involved, why, what they did, and what they learned together.

For example, by taking a civic learning approach, public administrators may begin to understand the public has different names for the problems. They may begin to understand that professional names control the discussion, define what is valuable, and exclude the public so that the public does not believe they have a role in solving the problem. This insight leads to an important research question: Do the values of deliberative politics and the values of an agency need to be complementary in order for a successful evaluative process to occur?

Government agencies are challenged to recognize that public deliberation is part of a process, not an “add on” or tool, to gain public support. The public should be seen as partners in the work, not as a group to provide input. Providing input is not the same as wrestling with hard choices and deciding where to spend resources of time and effort. When the public has no opportunity to deliberate about resource tradeoffs, the public administrators retain decision-making authority and the public is effectively excluded.

Once public administrators begin to understand how a community names a problem, they are more likely to be able to work together to solve it. However, aligning professional routines with public work is a key struggle. It may be that creating regular opportunities for public engagement—or public space—would provide a way to establish more effective timing and relationships between the public and the government.

Our research shows discomfort with changing relationships to be an important consideration in administrator tentativeness to engage the public. Capacity-building all around can help address some of the tensions between professional routines and deliberative practices. Helping administrators understand what they can expect from citizens and giving citizens the space to engage the issue can lead to better relationships between the groups. Such a relationship has the potential to align the work the government does with work the public can do, thus helping them to address the problems facing the community—together.

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The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation—not a grant-giving foundation—rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to “the problems behind the problems.”

The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

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