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EXCELLENCE IN PUBLIC SERVICE—HOW DO YOU REALLY KNOW?

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An impressive number of words have been produced on the topic of excellence in the public service. Many of these words are wise, and some of them are inspired, but there is a near-fatal shortcoming that has run through all of them: *we don't really know.* We don't know enough about the quality of the people we already have in the public service, and, not knowing, we are guessing at what ought to be done about it.

This shortcoming extends into most management and personnel studies. In the course of the Brookings analysis of New York City government's problems in getting and keeping professional, technical, and managerial personnel, we found few absolute measures and few relative measures of the quality of such employees.[1] The Municipal Manpower Commission report, which enumerates an impressive array of problems in getting excellent manpower for local governments in the United States, faced the same problem. Indeed, the Commission had to face the matter presumptively and speculatively:

> "In summary, such evidences *as there are* of the quality of today's APT [administrative, professional, technical] personnel in local governments—evidences of their age, training, and experience; observation of their vitality and performance; and the judgment of their peers in the public service—raise substantial doubts as to whether this body of men and women is equal to the changing role of local governments and the new large and challenging responsibilities that are to be thrust upon them.[2] (emphasis supplied)

"Excellence in Public Service—How Do You Really Know?" *Public Administration Review* 24 (1964): 170–174.

In these and other studies systems and concepts are analyzed, and changes are recommended in institutions and procedures. It is rare, however, that we get to the bare question of quality of people and the quality of their performance. We tend to deal with a tissue of folklore, assertions, and surface logic. Lacking more real evidence, it is hard to do otherwise.

In trying to judge quality in the public service, we can identify three levels of measurement of excellence: first, one we shall call *impressionistic;* second, one that might be called *presumptive;* and the third, *proven.* They are presented in ascending order of validity.

Impressionistic

This is the level at which the quality of public employees is most commonly and most noisily judged. It consists of people's *impressions* of the quality of public service. On the positive side it may lead to statements that a public employee or a group of such employees are truly excellent. Why? Because a citizen has been efficiently treated by someone giving information about taxation; because a bookkeeper in a government agency has completed 50 years of service without ever taking an hour of sick leave or a dollar from the petty cash drawer; or because a public employee has invented something or saved somebody's life or written an excellent publication.

On the negative side, where the press, legislative investigating committees, antagonistic politicians, and perhaps the public generally are busiest, impressions of the quality of the public service consists of magnification or perhaps simply factual recording of individual errors and failures. An ambulance fails to answer a call promptly, a revenue official takes public money to the dog track, a bureau chief makes a terrible speech, or the Dallas police fail to safeguard a prisoner.

On a broader scale we can make systematic surveys of what people think of the excellence of the public service. This was done in the recent book, *The Image of the Federal Service,* by Kilpatrick, Cummings, and Jennings of the Brookings Institution.[3] Among many other things it reports the judgments of samples of the population about the abilities of federal employees.

Presumptive

We proceed upward now to the next level at which the excellence of the public service is measured, that which *presumes* that the public service is good because we have made certain arrangements to assure its being good. Or, on the contrary, that the quality of the public service is poor because we have failed to make such arrangements. Examples: the public service is good because we have a merit system, or because we pay salaries which are nearly competitive with those of private industry, or because we have a procedure to dismiss the incompetent, or because we have a training program, or because we give medals to outstanding public servants. All these are good and positive provisions and it is easy to believe that the public service is better with them than without them.

The logical inadequacy of this approach will be pretty obvious. A merit system will not assure top quality personnel in and of itself. The achievements of a training program depend on who is trained and for what and how well. The person who receives the superior service medal may simply be the best of a bad lot.

It is this presumptive level of evaluation which runs through personnel studies like those previously mentioned and which fills a fair part of the writings on this topic sponsored by the American Society for Public Administration and the American Academy of Political and Social Science.

Proven

We come now to the level of investigation of excellence which is at the top and which we may call the *proven* level. Proving or disproving excellence in the public service is difficult and indeed distasteful. If you really mean it and really plan to go ahead with it many people will not want it to be done. It may also involve the establishment of systems of fact-finding or evaluation which will replace or conflict with existing systems and will therefore encounter that well-known impediment to the improvement of public administration: resistance to change.

Now how do we go about it? Let us consider two aspects of this: first, proving how good a government *program* is and second, how good government *people* are.

Program Evaluation

The evaluation of how good a government program is as a means of judging excellence in the public service is risky and returns to the area of presumptive judgments. An excellent government program can have a few poor people in it; a beautiful barn may house some terrible turkeys. Nevertheless, one may with reasonable validity presume that an excellent program is at least partly due to excellent management and excellent individual performance. How then can we evaluate government's programs?

Measured Progress Against Stated Goals. This is familiar to any student of government. Any agency that is well managed will have clearly and specifically identified its goals, have chartered a course for reaching them, and have provided means of measurement for judging their attainment. The goal may be the laying of so many cubic yards of concrete, or a reduction in the venereal disease rate or an increase in the number of home mortgage policies handled, or whatever. It is essential that the goals be set by experts

and that the means of measurement and progress be pretested and carefully validated and scrupulously observed.

The measurements, at least the statistical ones, can be quite convincing. A penal institution may be judged in part, for example, by the number of escapes; public health programs may be judged by trends in morbidity and mortality; credit programs can be judged by percentages of good loans and bad loans; rehabilitation programs may be judged by percentage of cases rehabilitated.

Accreditation. This is a familiar method of evaluation used for schools, colleges, and hospitals. If such an organization is officially accredited we know that it has attained at least a certain standard. The method is obviously deficient since many of us have had unfortunate educational experiences in accredited institutions and perhaps even unfortunate therapeutic experiences in accredited hospitals.

Productivity Analyses. This technique of evaluation is belatedly coming into recognition and use in the literature. Productivity analysis requires sophisticated and rigorous work by economists and statisticians to determine measures of productivity for a government agency. The federal Bureau of the Budget, as you may know, has been experimentally working on this with four or five federal agencies.[4] By productivity measurement one arrives at some interesting clues to possible improvement and some overall judgments. Of course it will not reveal the many individual successes and failures within the agency program which either contribute to or detract from its overall productivity and which may be matters of proper concern to anyone studying the excellence of the public service.

Ad Hoc Professional Evaluation. This method is often used, but it would benefit from more incisiveness, objectivity, and courage. It involves the use of expert commissions of inquiry to evaluate the quality of a government program. Many agencies have been "worked over" by such groups, some several times. The Social Security Administration has been reviewed by insurance experts; our aerial defense is checked by outside mathematicians; New York City's health laboratories are inspected by experts in the life sciences. Such studies too often do not make frank statements about quality of personnel. They are more likely to feel such professional kinship with the agency officials as to pull their punches on criticisms which may sound personal. They may also be reluctant to praise as warmly as they would like to for fear that this may blunt the effect of corrective recommendations.

Management Appraisal. This is a familiar technique, much used. Government agencies can be (and have been) systematically appraised on their

program effectiveness by representatives of a higher echelon of management or by an independent organization. This concept includes the idea of the inspector general in the military services and the type of appraisal given (or that ought to be given) to government agencies by investigators of the United States General Accounting Office. There is a danger that such appraisals will be too often hasty and too often done by people who may have generalized investigative skills but who lack background in the program under study. Nevertheless they can provide impressive evidence of program quality.

Cost Reductions. A government agency may also be judged by the economy with which it does its work. This may be assessed partly by its ability to maintain present staffing levels or even to reduce them in the face of increasing workloads or it may be judged by its ability to turn money back to the treasury at the end of the fiscal year. The validity of such judgments tends to be a function of some of the assumptions made at the start. An overgenerous beginning may make a government agency look better than it really is.

Technological Progress. Government programs may be judged also by the extent to which they have adapted to their own use the latest techniques of management and operation such as automatic data processing, or operations research. Also, by the extent to which they are using the most advanced knowledge in science, economics, medicine or whatever their field is.

Management Control and Coordination. Finally a government program may be judged by its own provisions for planning, supervision, control, coordination, and program replanning. This is based on the thought that the bureaucrat who is too busy cutting down a tree to sharpen his axe has muscles where his brains ought to be.

All the types of program judgments here covered must be tempered both with mercy and with care. Some governments are more favorably situated as to finances, geography and political climate than others, and proper allowance must be made for these factors. Perhaps these programs should be evaluated against those of others so situated. The government programs of the state of Mississippi, for example, could not fairly be set alongside of those of the state of New York or the state of California, but there is basis for comparing them with those of Alabama, Georgia, and Arkansas.

Evaluation of People

We come now to proven evaluations of the public servants themselves. One can use several kinds of measures based largely on accepted criteria in

the professions and occupations concerned and upon criteria which would be used by any thoughtful, careful, aggressive employer. These measures can be listed as follows:

Academic Degrees. The possession of a master's degree in social work presumes (there is that word again) a degree of understanding and general competence not present in those who lack it. A college graduate doing employer relations work for a department of labor may well know more than a high school graduate doing the same work.

Professional Registration or Certification. A P.E. engineer registration, or a CPA rating, or board certification in a field of medicine all are clear evidence of professional attainment. One may argue of course that many an engineer without his "PE" is better than many an engineer who has one. Nevertheless it is one indication. If the bridge and sewer department of city A has 70 percent engineers with PE licenses and that of city B has 10 percent, it may be appropriate to judge that the quality of the former is superior and for the city management of the latter to concern themselves with possible remedies. Again, there are many other factors to be taken into consideration.

Actual Performance. This may be a bold suggestion. Experts may be called in to watch the public servant performing his duties and to reach judgments accordingly. Such appraisal must of course be based upon preplanned, validated, accepted goals, the recording of facts and judgments about performance must be based on clearly understood criteria, and these data must be recorded objectively. Such evaluation must particularly provide for the evidence of creativity or of analytical skill or of skill at synthesis.

Evidence of Growth and Development. One important factor that one gathers from reading the literature on excellence and on human potentiality is that the outstanding people are the people who never stop growing, developing, advancing. This leads one to suggest that public employees may be judged by evidence of growth and progress. Do they add to their skills? Do they belong to professional societies? Do they write for publication? How do they spend their spare time? Do they take courses or do they engage in civic activity? It may not be fair to judge people this way, for a man with eight young children has no money or time for self-fulfillment—at least in other ways. This is true and perhaps it *isn't* fair. Still if a man goes to his job day after day and does the same work without giving any evidence of efforts to do it better or to develop himself into a more effective person, it may be concluded that he is a less excellent public employee than his counterpart who does those things. And in making these judgments we have to have tangible, valid evidence.

Ability to Use and Develop Others. This is a key factor in the excellence of any public official. How many people of outstanding ability has he recruited or has he developed? This, too, can be reported and judged.

The Sum of These Parts

Whoever wants to assess the quality of the public service—the citizen, the advisory commission, the investigative panel, the legislator, the professor—has all these proofs and clues available. Some will have been used already; some, not. Some will have been used for another purpose and will need to be interpreted. Some will need to be weighted heavily; others, lightly. It all depends on the situation to be evaluated.

What To Do About It?

Now that we have considered some tangible though difficult means of determining how excellent our public servants are, we consider what to do about it. It most cases the remedy will be suggested by the problem. If the agency doesn't have program goals, they must be set. If it has good goals, and they are being ignored, something can be done about it. If the hospital isn't accredited, it's generally obvious why. If the books are being kept with quill pens, get a systems analyst. If costs must be cut 10%, there are ways of doing it that are rarely apparent to the people in the agency.

As to people—qualified, excellent people—this part of the story has been told frequently, but it can be summed up in a few sentences:

- We must recruit for the public service on nearly equal terms. This means challenging work, comparable pay, rapid decisions on selections, adequate fringe benefits, and clear prospects of personal training and development.
- Training programs must be so fully developed and so generously financed that there is no question but that the public employee is being given the most advanced techniques, skills, and knowledges related to his job.
- Selection, particularly selection for promotion, must be severely competitive and must use *valid* measures of comparison.
- Discharge, reassignment or out-placement of those who do not measure up to their responsibility must be done rigorously.
- Along with all this we must do everything possible to improve the attractiveness of the public service, and the steps listed will help in doing that.
- Finally, publicity is essential—essential to participation by the citizen in improving the quality of his government. He must

know about and feel a share in any activity which contributes to the quality of the service he is getting.

The most advanced and most objective techniques possible should be used to determine how good our public servants actually are. If we do not use them we shall continue to be handicapped by the combination of ill-developed assertions and impressions that have heretofore clouded our efforts to identify and do something about genuine excellence in the public service.

Notes

1. David T. Stanley et al., *Professional Personnel for the City of New York* (Brookings Institution, 1963).
2. Municipal Manpower Commission, *Governmental Manpower for Tomorrow's Cities* (McGraw-Hill, 1962), p. 88.
3. Franklin C. Kilpatrick, Milton C. Cummings. Jr., and M. Kent Jennings, *The Image of the Federal Service* (Brookings Institution, 1964).
4. John W. Kendrick. "Exploring Productivity Measurement in Government." 23 *Public Administration Review* 59–66 (June, 1963).