

*PUBLIC MANAGEMENT THEORY:
WHAT IS IT?
WHAT SHOULD IT BE?*

James L. Perry

Ten years ago, I co-edited *Public Management: Public and Private Perspectives* (Perry and Kraemer, 1983), which sought to define the relatively new field of public management. That book, along with the contributions of a small number of other scholars (many of them represented elsewhere in this volume) was influential in articulating dissatisfaction with traditional public administration and generic management and initiating an identifiable field of public management.

The present volume marks a passage in the development of public management. A good part of the last decade was devoted to legitimizing public management — with all that entails — and to convincing other scholars that public managers did and should make a difference, eliciting testimonials from practitioners about the need and value of public management as an identifiable enterprise, and establishing that our knowledge about how managers make a difference is largely not random. The period of legitimizing has ended, and we are now entering a more serious stage, in which valued knowledge must be developed.

This new stage will be much more demanding than the first. What should public management theory aspire to provide? In brief, public management theory should provide useful and practical generalizations about how public managers should behave in varying situations. The phrase “useful and practical” is intended to suggest that public management theory must be relevant and problem-oriented. I also firmly believe in Kurt Lewin’s often repeated adage, that there is nothing so practical as a good theory. Thus, the injunction that theory be useful and practical is limiting, but not substantially.

Appropriate action by public managers may differ according to circumstances; no “one best way” exists for responding to every situation. At

the same time, scholars must be attentive to developing theory about particular facets of situations that define the domains of managerial action. These domains include the organizational and interorganizational context, the institution and institutional rules, incentive structures, and role sets (including public expectations and ethical frames). The important facets of the domains of managerial action are probably quite limited. Public management theory should strive to systematize the description of situations and of how effective action on the part of public managers varies across them.

Suggesting that public management theory provide practical insights into how public managers “should” behave implies a need for knowledge of or competency in both behavioral and normative theory. Behavioral theory can help public managers understand or explain the dynamics of the contexts in which they are situated and the efficacy of potential interventions. Normative theory gives public managers the capacity to think about and recognize how they ought to act in light of the values contending for expression in a given situation. Behavioral and normative theory represent two different logics that must be joined under the umbrella of public management theory.

The relationship that I envision between public management theory and public management itself is epitomized by the patient’s relationship with the physician. (This analogy with medicine is not new; years ago, Waldo argued that public administration should identify itself as a profession analogous to the field of medicine; see Waldo, 1968.) The process of healing a patient typically involves diagnosis, treatment, observation of the effects of treatment, and, depending on the success of the initial treatment, either cessation of treatment or initiation of a new cycle of diagnosis and treatment. Like the physician, a public manager searches for patterns in the situation, establishes a model of cause-effect relationships, identifies appropriate interventions, selects an intervention, and implements it. For the public manager, the process is likely to be fraught with considerably greater uncertainty than the physician faces. The important point is that theory contributes to effective performance, but not in completely predictable ways. Argyris, Putnam, and Smith (1985) have referred to this way of thinking about the relationship between theory and practice as “action science.”

Even if we are successful in developing public management theory along the lines just suggested, there are barriers to its effectiveness that must also capture the attention of public management scholars. One barrier involves translating knowledge about how to respond to a situation into effective behavior. A simple example will illustrate the point. Suppose that a public manager is engaged in legislatively authorized negotiations with constituents about rerouting an expressway through an urban neighborhood. The negotiations reach a critical stage, where the manager, given what she knows about interest-group dynamics, sees that she has the opportunity to obtain agreement from a winning coalition of the affected parties, *if* she can display an irrevocable commitment to the settlement option on the table. Let us assume

that her estimate of the situation (the opportunity for a winning coalition) and her understanding of the appropriate intervention (a display of irrevocable commitment) are accurate. Her success still depends on her skill in *communicating* her irrevocable commitment to the option on the table.

This example shows that managerial skills are essential to realizing the promise of useful and practical generalizations about public management. It also implies that part of the research agenda attendant to the development of public management theory will involve identifying the skills necessary to utilize theory successfully. Boyatzis (1982) and Perry (1989) have identified such skills in a general way, but further research must extend these initial efforts.

Public management theory must speak to all public managers, not just those at the strategic apex of public organizations. Much of what I read — and, I confess, some of what I have written — is slanted toward these higher-level positions. The jobs of assistant secretaries and bureau chiefs are more glamorous than those of first-line supervisors and middle managers. On the face of it, incumbents of top-level positions also have more influence and are more “public” than their colleagues who are camouflaged by layers of administration. But to ignore public managers who do not reside at the top of organizational hierarchies is to overlook a large and important clientele. Public management theory must be as attentive to developing useful knowledge for the large mass of managers in the middle as it is to developing theory relevant to the managers at the top.