

## Organizational Performance

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# Management by Inquiry: A Discursive Accountability System for Large Organizations

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*Over the past decade, American police departments have developed a new management methodology that is beginning to be adopted by agencies outside law enforcement. Although the technique has been given different names by different agencies, this article refers to it generically as "management by inquiry" because the approach uses frequent, highly formalized meetings of top executives, middle management, and line personnel to inquire into the operations of individual units. The authors have had five years of direct experience with management by inquiry and have observed it in other jurisdictions. The present analysis draws on Habermas's theory of communicative action to contrast the communication premises in much management theory and practice with those implicit in inquiry-centered management. The article concludes that management by inquiry has dramatic effects on administrative behavior because it takes advantage of universal communicative norms that public administration has long overlooked.*

A powerful new management technique developed by American police departments in the past decade is now beginning to be adopted by local, state, and federal agencies outside law enforcement.<sup>1</sup> The technique employs regularly scheduled, highly formalized meetings between top executives, middle management, and line personnel to discuss the performance and operation of individual units. In New York City, where this method of management originated, the approach is referred to as Compstat, but elsewhere it has been given other names depending on the nomenclature of the organization using it.<sup>2</sup> At the Broward Sheriff's Office, which instituted it in 1997 and subsequently extended it beyond law enforcement to corrections and administrative support units, it is called PowerTrac.<sup>3</sup> We shall refer to the generic technique as *management by inquiry* and its administrative directives as *inquirements*.

We coined the term "inquirement" to highlight and overcome a bias in the ordinary language of accountability. By inquirement, we mean an obligation to respond discursively and publicly to a future inquiry

about a specified responsibility. This word's absence from standard English suggests that our culture overlooks or discourages certain forms of accountability. By envisioning requirements but not *inquirements*, the language anticipates assessments based on objective performance, but not those that involve discursive examinations of reasoning, motives, and attitudes. This linguistic exclusion reflects a conceptual blind spot in modern culture identified by both Habermas (1987, 294–301) and Foucault (2001), which, by picturing subjectivity as a self-contained mind contemplating an external world, obscures the importance of communication in perception, motivation, and action.

We argue that this same blind spot afflicts much of American social science, including public administration, and that it constrains management theory and practice. It is not by happenstance that Compstat, PowerTrac, and other inquirement processes originated in law enforcement, an administrative arena that is somewhat removed from other areas of government and therefore only loosely connected to trends in mainstream management thinking. Today, most management systems used in American government rely more on material sanctions and incentives than on discursive communication to manage street-level administrative behavior.<sup>4</sup> Although discursive processes are often employed by upper management when formulating agency objectives and strategies, they are generally considered to be incapable, by themselves, of directing administrative behavior down through the ranks. As academic critics of popular management techniques have pointed out (Diller 2000; Knights and Willmott 2000; Thomas 1998), if structured discourse is used at all for administrative personnel beneath the upper echelons, it is typically a pseudodemocratic effort to foster buy-in and defuse employee dissatisfaction, not a genuine dialogue across administrative levels to set and adjust the course of administrative action. Moreover, even enthusiastic exponents of discursive political processes have not advocated them for managing public organizations

(Dryzek 1987). Hence, the demonstrated power of discursive processes such as Compstat and PowerTrac to transmogrify police departments, which are notoriously resistant to change, calls for a reconsideration of communication in public administration theory and practice.

Accordingly, our aim in this article is not so much to describe Compstat, PowerTrac, and other inquiry-centered accountability processes—this has already been done by others<sup>5</sup>—but to explain the surprising efficacy of a management system that relies mainly on structured discourse instead of material rewards and penalties to direct administrative behavior in the middle and lower tiers of large organizations. We also examine the management technique's potential for misuse and abuse along the lines discussed in critical organization studies, which have exposed the dark side of participatory management techniques that appear democratic but actually strengthen manager domination (Barker 1993; Burris 1989; Ezzamel and Willmott 1998; Jermier 1998; Sturdy, Knights, and Willmott 1992; Thomas 1998; Wilkinson and Willmott 1995). The empirical basis for our observations of management by inquiry includes five years of direct experience with PowerTrac and site visits to study discursive management processes in New York City, Baltimore, and London's legendary Scotland Yard.<sup>6</sup> Our analysis employs Habermas's theory of communicative action, a transcendental model of ordinary language that underpins his critical theory of society. After analyzing inquiry-centered management, we discuss the study's implications for public administration theory and practice.

### Administrative Discourse

Formalized administrative discourse, in which groups of administrators follow a structured format to discuss designated issues, is a pervasive feature of American government (Poister and Streib 1994). Examples include staff retreats, strategic planning, annual budget meetings, and administrative rulemaking. Moreover, administrative discourse has long been a subject of both theoretical and practical concern to scholars of management and public administration, who have designed such well-known discursive methodologies as management by objectives, zero-based budgeting, total quality management, performance management, strategic management, performance-based budgeting, and the program planning and budgeting system (Abrahamson 1997).

However, these and other formal discursive processes that are routinely practiced today differ from Compstat, PowerTrac, and other inquiry-centered management systems in both form and function. In large part, they are not designed to alter administrative behavior down through the ranks but only to formulate objectives, assess options, and set the stage for

subsequent agency activity.<sup>7</sup> Their formats often reflect this purpose by encouraging creativity and a certain degree of utopianism before moving to issues of administration. Once these processes arrive at decisions on goals, objectives, and direction, they are stopped, and the chosen course of action is then initiated and maintained by a combination of rewards and sanctions.

Inquiry-centered management reverses this approach to administrative discourse. Rather than suspending action to formulate distal objectives and long-term strategies that then frame agency administration, in-quirement processes weave formal discourse *into* administration and use the discourse itself to evaluate and direct the behavior of individuals and units at the street level. In this sense, inquiry-centered management is more than just another format for administrative discourse; it is a system of *discursive accountability*.

PowerTrac, Compstat, and similar in-quirement processes are organized around formal meetings that interrogate managers about their decisions, actions, plans, and ideas. One precinct, district, or other jurisdictional unit is addressed at a time. Precinct commanders are brought before the upper echelon to review data for their jurisdictions on crime trends, arrests, field interviews, crime-scene processing, and the like, as well as indicators of the unit's utilization of resources (such as expenditures for overtime, scheduling of fleet maintenance, and use of sick leave). Commanders are questioned about their actions in light of the data, and their answers are probed to check their knowledge of local circumstances, explore their interpretation of the numbers, and formulate new initiatives to address emerging crime patterns or administrative weaknesses.

How often each unit undergoes the in-quirement review usually depends on the size of the agency. At the Broward Sheriff's Office, which is one of the nation's largest local law enforcement agencies, each unit is scheduled to go through PowerTrac every four to six weeks. Smaller agencies may examine their units more frequently because they have fewer units to rotate through the cycle. Some agencies conduct their in-quirement process on a set schedule but do not cycle the units through in a predetermined order, preferring instead to select the units randomly or on an as-needed basis.

In U.S. law enforcement agencies, the in-quirement process is intended to serve two functions. One is to establish a direct line of accountability between all units and the agency's highest decision makers. The in-quirement process is also intended to provide a forum for problem solving in which questions can be raised and evidence examined about the underlying nature of crime trends and the best tactics for crime prevention and reduction.

Agencies vary in the relative degree of emphasis they place on these two functions. New York City tends to stress accountability because of the agency's large size and the demands this imposes on discipline maintenance and centralized direction. Scotland Yard gives much greater emphasis to pooling and synthesizing intelligence. It uses a system of committees to identify organized crime, gang conflict, and other criminality requiring a coordinated regional, national, or international response.

Baltimore and Broward County give more or less equal emphasis to accountability and problem solving but in different ways. Baltimore's inurement process is comparatively informal and unstructured because unlike other agencies, it applies management by inquiry to a wide range of functions, not just law enforcement. In public meetings covered by local print and television media, the heads of each major division of Baltimore's city government are questioned by the mayor and others with citywide management responsibilities.

The Broward Sheriff's Office emphasizes accountability in its top-level inurement review, but it has instituted inurement processes at lower levels of the organization to stress problem solving. The reasons for this approach will be discussed later when we analyze inurement in terms of communicative action. Suffice it to say that the relationship between accountability and inquiry involves trade-offs that reveal much about the underlying dynamics of communication in public administration.

Despite significant differences across the agencies that are using it, inquiry-centered management entails a major change in the form and function of administrative discourse. Table 1 lists the main differences between management by inquiry and traditional management practices. In the latter, administrative discourse focuses on ends rather than means, and it is usually limited to short bursts within the annual budget cycle. Participatory processes with varying degrees of formality are employed in advance of each new fiscal year to develop unit goals and objectives, which are injected back into the administrative system by

attaching promised rewards and penalties to subsequent performance. In contrast, management by inquiry calls on administrators to continually evaluate their own performance; introduce new performance measures and downgrade others as circumstances change; focus on immediate results rather than year-end objectives; and constantly adjust the activities and administrative procedures of their units to improve performance, increase efficiency, and respond to evolving conditions or changing priorities.

### Communication in Management Theory and Practice

The form and function assigned to administrative discourse in any given management technique flow from premises about the role of communication in human behavior. Inquiry-centered management is implicitly based on the belief that motives and actions are shaped primarily by interpersonal communications and agreements. Compstat and PowerTrac are designed to intensify the normal sense of obligation that human beings feel about keeping their word. The format of the discursive sessions, the physical layout of the rooms in which they are held, the composition of audiences, and other features of the interrogative meetings magnify the public character of management decisions.<sup>8</sup>

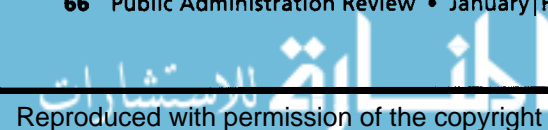
### The Information-Conveyance Model of Communication

Most other management techniques in use today rely less on administrative discourse and more on conditional rewards and penalties because mainstream management theory shares the communication premises of modern culture, which underestimate the extent to which intentions are communicatively formed. In the modern era, communication tends to be seen as simply a transfer of information, not the medium by which human beings construct and maintain the concepts, norms, personal biographies, and collective identities that prefigure their motives and intentions.

As Wittgenstein demonstrated in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), this information-conveyance

**Table 1** Administrative Discourse

	Prevailing Approach to Administrative Discourse	Discourse in Management by Inquiry
Medium of accountability	Material rewards and penalties conditioned on performance	"Inurement"—obligation to account publicly for actions and results
Function of formal discussion process	Setting goals and objectives	Explaining actions and adjusting tactics
Criteria for making day-to-day decisions	Implications for unit-specific objectives previously extrapolated from agency mission	Indicators of social conditions and trends, unit administration, and unit performance
Frequency	Annual or semiannual	Every four to six weeks
Firmness of evaluative criteria	Set in advance and rigid	Continuously reexamined and constantly shifting



model of communication is normal and understandable even though it is inaccurate. It is associated with what Wittgenstein referred to as the "naming theory" of language, that is, the theory that the meaning of words comes from the things, actions, or other phenomena to which they refer. Management theorists implicitly rely on this theory when they think of organizations as having objectively defined and externally imposed missions against which administrative activities and results can be straightforwardly assessed. Communicating information about the agency's mission is thought to be of little value in securing administrative cohesion and compliance because administrators' motives are assumed to originate outside this communicative context (i.e., in each administrator's personal ambitions and situational interests).

This is not to say that prevailing management theory and practice assume that communication has no influence at all on behavior. Everyone knows that communication can have significant impacts on administrative action. However, management theory generally assumes that communication affects behavior by affecting beliefs, not values and motives. In theory, communication influences behavior by shaping people's perceptions of the action pathways open to them and the consequences associated with each alternative. Intentions are formed—courses of action are chosen—as pathways are evaluated in terms of their ability to fulfill motivations, preferences, values, and ambitions that are supposedly inculcated during childhood and adolescence. This same cognitive-instrumental account of volition has been accepted by leading scholars of public administration (Dahl and Lindblom 1953, 97–126; Lindblom 1977; March 1999, 66) and is implicit in much policy making and program evaluation (deHaven-Smith 1988, 84–85).

### **Implications for Administrative Discourse**

The purpose, format, frequency, and timing of the discursive processes now practiced routinely in American government follow more or less directly from this implicit theory. The function of most administrative discourse is twofold. In part, it is intended to force management and staff to examine their programs and procedures in light of agency-wide needs and goals. However, this examination is seldom expected to produce enduring changes because administrative behavior is thought to be governed, not by abstract agreements or policies, but by motivations arising exogenously from personal ambitions and immediate circumstances. Hence, the second function of administrative discourse is to extrapolate departmental objectives and incentives from agency-wide needs and goals so that the immediate interests of middle managers and staff can be linked to the agency's mission.

The typical format for administrative discourse begins with generalities. Programs, administrative procedures, and other tactical matters are not taken up until broad principles and abstract goals have been stated and embraced. This sequencing reflects a concern that administrative discourse is at risk of being subverted by subagency interests. Rather than working up from ground-level observations to policy decisions, administrative discourse starts at a high level of abstraction in an effort to transcend biases that are thought to arise from administrators' personal inclinations and situational interests.

Similarly, formal administrative discourse about objectives and policies is seldom undertaken more than once or twice a year because, in theory, greater frequency would undermine administrative discipline. The main challenge facing managers, in addition to identifying sanctions and incentives that can channel departmental units toward agency-wide goals, is keeping middle management and the rank and file harnessed to the incentive structure. To the extent that middle managers and line staff are largely unmoved by discussions of policy and mission, continuous administrative discourse would simply expose the incentive structure to constant criticism and reconsideration.

### **The Theory of Communicative Action**

The law enforcement officers who developed inquiry-centered management were not schooled in Habermas's theory of communicative action, but the theory can explain inquirers' power as a management technique. As Habermas notes (1987, 294–301), the theory was formulated specifically to move beyond the Cartesian premises of modernity and to accommodate the observations of Wittgenstein and others about the communicative foundations of intentionality.<sup>9</sup> Habermas grounds the theory of communicative action in the peculiar but universally recognized tendency for people to feel bound by their promises, to give reasons for their beliefs and actions, and to accede to the better arguments and more justifiable claims of others.

Habermas (1973, 8–17) argues that communication has this normative character because of presuppositions that are built into speech. As speaking creatures, he explains, human beings assume they can give reasons for their actions, and they presuppose that others are similarly able to account for their actions. According to Habermas, even when people are not consciously forming intentions but are, instead, just obeying rules or following social conventions, they generally assume these rules and norms can be justified in the same way. This is why most people experience some form of psychic discomfort (guilt, anxiety, depression, etc.) when they deceive someone, break laws, or defy conventions; by denying the presuppositions of speech,



such actions violate the basic tenets of people's identities as human beings.

Of course, Habermas (1992, 139–46) recognizes there are many areas of activity in which these expectations are suspended—for example, rules are proscribed from questioning and commands are to be followed without hesitation—but in his repeated criticism of Luhmann's (1990) systems theory, he points out that even in these cases, the range of activity exempted from communicative challenge and the need for exemption have themselves been discursively decided and remain open to reconsideration. In fact, it is for these kinds of situations, in which actions come into question and norms are reconsidered, that Habermas uses the word *discourse*. He points out that formal systems of public discourse—such as judicial hearings, legislative processes, and political debates—as well as the informal public discourse conducted in the mass media, have this form and function, that is, they deal with previously routine activities that have become problematic and contested, and they are designed to adjust the rules and return the activity to normalcy.

### Critical Theory

Habermas's conception of government and politics is referred to as *critical theory* because it begins from an ideal conception of public discourse and then evaluates existing discursive processes against it to explain a variety of social and political problems. In the last section of the present article, we shall use this same approach, but in reverse, to consider whether inquisition processes may be able to mitigate tensions between bureaucracy and democracy in modern industrial societies. Critical theory, which is grounded in Habermas's conception of communicative action, has attracted a large following in the social sciences, partly because it can account for the strange character of political legitimacy (e.g., the suddenness with which legitimacy can evaporate, the necessity for governments to constantly justify their actions to mass publics, and the potential for deficits of legitimacy to cause the collapse of powerful regimes, such as the Nixon administration, or the dissolution of powerful empires like the Soviet Union). The notion that a particular ideal can operate as a force in history even though it has not been consciously articulated follows from the premise that this ideal is embedded in human nature, specifically, in speech.

Habermas formulates an ideal model of public discourse by explicating the universal norms that are implicit in speech. Following Wittgenstein, he approaches language as a medium for social cooperation rather than a collection of names for objects, which is why he refers to his language theory as the theory of *communicative action*. Habermas (2001, 85–103) argues that for speech to function properly in this capacity, three requirements must be met: (1) statements about objective circumstances must be factually or empirically true; (2) expressions of feelings and beliefs must be authentic (i.e., sincere statements); and (3) commands, explanations, and suggestions must correctly reflect the participants' hierarchical relationships. Discourse is needed and expected whenever any of these conditions comes into question. The purpose of discourse, therefore, is to redeem the "validity claims" of ordinary speech.

At first blush, Habermas's theory of communicative action may appear pointless, but its utility becomes evident when we try to understand how and why communication can break down and what happens when it does. According to the theory, communication will malfunction if questions about any of the three validity claims that are implicit in speech come into question and are left unresolved. In "Reflections on Communicative Pathology," Habermas (2001, 131–79) says this can happen in either or both of two ways: (1) discussion of one or more of the three types of claims can be foreclosed illegitimately by force, threats, or unconscious fears, or (2) participants can adopt a strategic rather than a communicative orientation to the discussion, that is, they can manipulate the discussion to gain or protect personal advantages rather than to seek factually sound, emotionally honest, and appropriately authorized decisions. In either case, the communication failure will produce a variety of problems—psychological, social, or political—depending on the nature of the malfunction.

### The Power and Pitfalls of Management by Inquiry

The successes achieved by PowerTrac, Compstat, and other discursive accountability systems, as well as the problems they typically encounter, can be analyzed in terms of the communicative norms in Habermas's framework. Table 2 lists all of the combinations of validity claims and communicative outcomes

**Table 2** Forms of Successful and Unsuccessful Communication

		Successful Communication	Communication Malfunction	
Validity claim	Authenticity	Vow, repent	Blocked communication	Strategic motivation
	Truth	Test, adjust theoretical parameters	Motivation failure Theory failure	Feign agreement, enthusiasm Distort, spin, misreport, misinterpret data

delineated by Habermas's account of discourse. The first column can be applied to elucidate the dynamics, feel, and consequences of inquiry-centered management when it is successful in producing a true consensus. The second and third columns help clarify several well-known administrative problems that inquiry-centered management addresses but does not always overcome and can sometimes exacerbate.

### The Power of Communicative Norms

The professional and academic literature on Compstat emphasizes inquiry-centered management's reliance on performance indicators to continuously assess units and personnel, allocate resources, and set agency priorities. But the theory of communicative action helps us to recognize there is much more to management by inquiry than data-based assessments of performance. When inquisition sessions work well, they actually focus on the evaluation of individual and unit performance for only brief periods. The bulk of the discussion is devoted to theorizing and strategizing. In PowerTrac, for example, participants draw on crime data, aerial photography, data maps, and other resources to explore competing explanations of particular crimes, crime sprees, or crime trends. They also brainstorm how best to respond to emerging trends, evaluating proposed initiatives not only in relation to agency-wide objectives but also in light of the administrative circumstances of different units.<sup>10</sup> In Habermas's terms, this means that inquisition sessions take up all three types of validity claims—authority, authenticity, and truth—but the emphasis is on truth, that is, the validity of theories and hypotheses about crime, crime prevention, community cooperation, and other factors that are related to the agency's mission.

Nonetheless, compared to theoretical questions, issues of authenticity and authority are much more emotionally charged for the participants, and this is probably why the literature stresses them despite their limited role. The authenticity (i.e., sincerity and honesty) of unit managers will be challenged if managers appear to be prevaricating as they respond to questions and explain their actions. For example, commanders in law enforcement will almost always claim to have developed their response to crime trends on the basis of the crimes' timing and location, when in actuality they sometimes deploy personnel partly for the convenience of officers. In PowerTrac, such claims are tested by examining personnel timesheets, which are displayed on a large screen for everyone to see. If a commander is shown to have been misleading the group, the humiliation is palpable. Consequently, there is no need for criticism or lectures from top leaders. In effect, the lie becomes its own punishment.

Validity claims related to authority are dealt with in exchanges that are equally brief. Typically, the issue

of authority arises when a promised action has not been carried out and the cause of the implementation failure needs to be identified. In such cases, it is not uncommon for middle managers to try to shift accountability downward by saying they had assigned the responsibility to someone else. In truth, however, such buck passing is an abrogation of management responsibility, which becomes painfully evident when managers who offer this excuse are asked why they did not personally check to ensure the action had been executed. This question carries much more force than an explicit admonition because answering it usually requires self-criticism in front of the group.

Habermas's theory of communicative action also explains why these kinds of discursive exchanges, although brief, have such a strong emotional impact on everyone involved. They do so, not exclusively or even primarily because they publicly highlight managers' mistakes and misjudgments, but because they expose violations of universal communicative norms (i.e., the expectation that people will speak honestly and take responsibility for their actions). If human beings did not recognize these norms implicitly, much more time would have to be spent on such issues in PowerTrac, Compstat, and other inquisition processes.

By the same token, communicative norms account for the ability of inquisition processes to cause rapid, fundamental, and enduring changes in administrative behavior. Administrative agreements reached in inquisition processes take on the character of vows. In part, this is because they are expressed publicly, but it is also a consequence of the content of the discourse leading up to decisions. As participants reveal their motives, expectations, and reasoning, and as they discursively adjust their intentions and beliefs, they are constructing their own identities as responsible professionals. To subsequently ignore agreements reached in this way is psychologically painful because it violates the individual's personhood.

### Strategic Communication and Goal Displacement

All systems of performance monitoring are vulnerable to manipulation, and management by inquiry is no exception. In New Orleans, which uses an inquisition process that stresses accountability for crime trends, several law enforcement officers were disciplined in 2003 for reclassifying reported crimes to make crime rates in their zones appear lower than they actually were (McCrary 2004). Our experience with PowerTrac suggests that, precisely because inquisition processes are emotionally charged, they can intensify bureaucratic tendencies to subvert or circumvent systems intended to monitor administrative performance.

In traditional management theory and practice, such manipulation is typically seen as a form of goal displacement—the tendency for administrators to become preoccupied with organizational procedures and outputs while losing sight of the organization's larger mission and policy objectives. The concept of goal displacement has been attributed variously to Merton (1949), Blau (1955), and Michels (1962). In the context of performance monitoring, goal displacement occurs when administrators take actions to improve their unit's scores on performance indicators while knowing that these actions do not truly support and perhaps even contravene their agency's true mission. The countermeasure traditionally prescribed in these circumstances is to tighten administrative controls and adjust performance indicators so that manipulation is prevented.

In contrast, Habermas's analysis implies that the goal-displacement tendencies of large organizations should be attacked discursively. In terms of the theory of communicative action, goal displacement is an example of strategic communication, which violates universal communicative norms by seeking to manipulate rather than to achieve understanding. Hence, in theory, it is sustainable only as long as it remains concealed; if it is exposed (e.g., by evidence of false claims or by contradictions between statements and actions), it will be abandoned or other participants will withdraw from the discussion.

Generally, our experience with PowerTrac has been consistent with this expectation. Participants who try to rationalize self-serving decisions—by claiming, for example, that a spike in local crime rates was the result of random events (weather, holidays, the end of the school year, etc.) and therefore warranted no systematic response—will quickly change their position if they are challenged to defend it and the evidence contradicts them. Rationalizations, much less outright deceptions, are difficult to carry off when reasoning is probed and empirical claims are checked on the spot.

However, management by inquiry can overcome administrative evasion only under certain conditions. To be effective at rooting out goal displacement and other forms of strategic communication, inquest processes must be structured to downplay accountability and stress discursive theorizing and problem solving. Inquest reviews that primarily seek to uncover mistakes and assign blame can provoke an agency-wide defensiveness that is much more resistant to discursive deconstruction than isolated obfuscation. If many or most administrators start to agree among themselves that their agency's inquest processes are nitpicking, arbitrary, or unrealistic, their reactionary consensus will carry normative force of its own—in effect, the inquest process itself will have been judged guilty of violating communicative

norms. In this context, administrators at the middle and lower levels of the organization may begin to feel that it is morally acceptable to collude with one another to evade management monitoring and accountability.

To guard against overdoing its inquest process, the Broward Sheriff's Office periodically conducts small-group discussions with deputies and sergeants to hear about their assessment of PowerTrac. Participants are randomly selected, deputies and sergeants meet separately, and the discussions are facilitated and summarized by a university researcher. In 2001, the research found that street-level officers viewed PowerTrac as unnecessarily punitive and overly focused on personnel assignments. The discussants reported that PowerTrac was causing district offices to develop too many operational plans (crime sweeps, stakeouts, etc.) and was overburdening everyone with paperwork to document unit activities. On the basis of these findings, PowerTrac was adjusted to be more constructive and positive, and less formal inquest processes were instituted on a weekly basis at the district level to create additional opportunities for discursive problem solving. Although PowerTrac itself continues to be criticized somewhat by deputies and sergeants for scrutinizing personnel utilization, management by inquiry at the district level has been embraced enthusiastically.

Significantly, we learned from this research and practice that in a system of inquiry-centered management, the tendency for communication to become strategic originates primarily from those who are directing the inquest process, not from the lower-level administrators who are being questioned. Traditional management theory and practice often overlook administrative malfunctions that originate from the top because management theory has traditionally conceptualized its subject matter from the perspective of the manager rather than the managed. In effect, the latter are treated as the problem that makes management necessary in the first place. With concepts such as bounded rationality, incrementalism, path dependency, and "satisficing," rank-and-file administrators are depicted as inhabitants of a cognitive and motivational tunnel that is far removed from agency missions. Although administrative failures are occasionally blamed on bad policies, more often they are attributed to the splintering of agency cohesion and the loss of management control as directives move down the chain of command.

However, this manager-oriented perspective on administration is based on a premise that needs to be tested rather than presumed, namely, that rank-and-file administrators are naturally preoccupied with their own interests and circumstances and largely indifferent to their agency's mission and goals. In the

concept of strategic communication, the theory of communicative action recognizes that in some circumstances, administrators may come to pursue their personal interests at the expense of organizational goals, but the theory implies that administrators who do so consciously violate normative expectations that call for them to serve agency-wide interests. Thus, the theory directs attention in such cases to efforts made by administrators to conceal their intentions and take advantage of the good faith of others. Such concealment tacitly acknowledges the existence if not the legitimacy of agency norms that, according to traditional management theory and practice, rarely exist and seldom exert much influence.

When strategic communication temporarily became a problem in relation to PowerTrac, it was not because middle managers and street-level administrators simply wanted to conceal failures or mistakes. In large part, the communication breakdown originated not with them, but with the managers who were responsible for administering the inquisition reviews. They became concerned about maintaining control of the process and demonstrating their contribution to it by uncovering performance issues in the districts. PowerTrac questions began to be scripted to encourage evasive answers, and analyses were prepared in advance to refute the anticipated responses. Faced with these entrapping tactics, middle managers and line-level administrators naturally became defensive.

### **A Remaining Problem: Blocked Communication**

Another communicative malfunction that inquiry-centered management can encounter and perhaps exacerbate occurs when communication is not so much distorted as blocked outright. In large organizations, administrators often fear that exposing problems, criticizing superiors, or speaking truthfully in other ways will be punished by anyone in a position of power who feels threatened. Habermas points out that communication breakdowns of this sort tend to be intractable because communicative norms have themselves become part of the communication blockages. In police departments, for example, problems of favoritism, nepotism, or sexual harassment may occur and may be widely recognized by line staff within a given unit, but these problems are likely to go unreported to upper management because reporting them would mean going outside the chain of command, which is a communicative structure that is essential to the unit's ability to act quickly in life-threatening circumstances. Ironically, a problem that is harming the cohesion of the unit goes unreported for the sake of unit cohesion, which is to say that communication is blocked so that communication can be preserved.

Habermas's theory suggests that communication short-circuits of this sort are problematic not only

because they leave management with unrecognized administrative disorder but also because they generate other communication malfunctions. When universal communicative norms are violated, everyone involved feels discomfort even if they do not recognize or understand its source. Those who are standing in the way of open discourse feel pressure every time the issue they are suppressing arises and those who are present let the matter drop with an awkward silence. Those who feel too threatened to speak out experience a sense of self-betrayal and cowardice. Often, both the silencers and the silenced try to relieve their guilt and anxiety by using humor, innuendo, and other subtle messages to justify themselves. Although this may make them feel better temporarily, it involves yet another communication breakdown, for those being attacked are denied a reasonable opportunity to respond. This exacerbates resentments, subjects people to hidden ridicule, and brings subterranean criticism of top management.

One partial antidote to this weakness of inquiry-centered management is to establish other forums of communication across organizational strata. At the Broward Sheriff's Office, for example, line-level officers are selected at random to attend a monthly meeting with the sheriff. The meeting is informal and social in nature, which removes some of the chain-of-command inhibitions to communication. Another approach, described in the previous section, is to have an outside facilitator lead focus groups with middle management and line staff. The essential consideration in designing such forums is to use communicative norms to break through communicative inhibitions.

### **Implications**

Although space limitations preclude a full exposition here, the preceding analysis of discursive accountability has potentially far-reaching implications because it is based on a theory of communication that reformulates long-unquestioned premises at the foundation of mainstream management theory. Let us first sketch in broad strokes the implications for management practice and then conclude with some observations about public administration.

### **Practical Implications**

As a practical matter, the analysis offers insight into how performance management and other management systems with predetermined goals and preset criteria for assessing administrative action might be improved without moving to full-fledged inquisition processes such as PowerTrac or Compstat. Performance management has been widely adopted in the United States at all levels of government in an effort to steer administrative activities without exacerbating the goal-displacement tendencies of large organizations. Earlier management systems with



similar aims, such as management by objectives, zero-based budgeting, and the program planning and budgeting system, focused on agency activities and proximate outputs. In contrast, performance management gives managers latitude on matters of process and outputs while holding them accountable for results related to the basic functions and missions of their agencies.

The verdict on performance management is still out, but the theory of communicative action suggests that, all other things equal, it is unlikely to prove much more effective than its predecessors. In practice, if not in theory, performance management does encourage administrative discourse but only about how to achieve agency objectives. This question involves only one dimension of discursive communication (i.e., validity claims about empirical theories and facts, which, in this case, are premises and hypotheses about the agency's domain of intervention and targeted problems). Overlooked are validity claims, which are equally present in all communicative acts, pertaining to speakers' motives and authority. Consequently, performance management and similar systems of administration not only fail to take full advantage of universal communicative norms, they often violate these norms by trying to control administrative behavior with sanctions and incentives while foreclosing administrative discourse on legitimate questions about agency goals, resources, and command structures. The result is that they may reinforce strategic orientations and thereby cause or exacerbate administrative conflict, manipulation, and indifference to agency-wide needs and obligations.

Still, there is no need to conclude that these potential problems with performance management cannot be corrected. The key is to supplement performance management with formal administrative discourse that fulfills communicative norms and yet does not abandon aspirations to results-oriented agency accountability. Our experience with PowerTrac suggests that an effective discursive format for this purpose is to have managers address a series of questions about their unit's performance, the reasoning behind their administrative decisions, and their plans for future administrative action. Asking for spontaneous responses to appropriately framed questions brings communicative norms into play.

Top managers need to be wary, however, of using inquisition processes to lay traps for subordinates. When performance data or other information causes top managers to suspect administrative problems in one of their subordinate units, they need to avoid prejudgments and remain detached. Otherwise, their questioning of unit administrators and their analyses of data on unit performance will be designed not to reach consensus on conditions and tactics, but to

entrap or embarrass. To the extent that administrative discourse is seen as a game of "gotcha," it will reinforce rather than expose and dissolve defensive thinking, and the communicative weakness of performance management will be amplified rather than corrected. Hence, it is essential that inquisition processes be carefully structured to facilitate discursive problem solving, discourage heavy-handed questioning, and respect the dignity of all participants.

### Implications for Public Administration Theory

In closing, we would like to turn to a much broader issue: the relationship between bureaucracy and democracy in the United States and other Western industrial democracies. The theory of communicative action and the concept of inquisition lay the foundation for a more insightful response to the popular view that modern representative government is too large and bureaucratic. In their need to address this widely shared prejudice, public administration scholars have long faced a dilemma. On one hand, scientific norms and accepted social scientific theory require that these attitudes be treated with skepticism; as Lindblom (1977), Dryzek (1996), Mitchell (1997), and others have explained, they are part of an ideology that conceals and rationalizes the interests of dominant classes, which use their ownership and control of societal resources to restrict public discourse and thereby shape mass opinion. On the other hand, if public administration scholars as a group were to dismiss antigovernment, pro-business beliefs as ideological myths, they would make themselves vulnerable to the same accusation (i.e., that they are just the ideological handmaidens of government bureaucrats). Hence, much theorizing in the discipline has followed a middle course: Although it treats bureaucracy as problematic, it does not advocate radical reductions in government's scope and size but instead searches for management techniques and governance frameworks to enhance government's administrative performance and accountability. Even the new institutionalism, which was touted in Fredrickson's (1999) Gaus Lecture as an answer to the "disarticulated state," remains on this path because, much like Luhmann's (1990) systems theory, it fails to provide a basis for evaluating a given institution's social function, assessing the constellation of institutions in a given society, or just differentiating tyranny from "socialization" or servility from "social capital."

The theory of communicative action and the concept of inquisition offer a route out of this dilemma because they reject the conveyance model of communication, which not only infuses much management theory and practice but also underpins the antigovernment ideology of the dominant classes. The thesis that the administrative apparatus of representative government is slipping free of popular control and growing

obese, wasteful, and meddlesome is supported by neither demonstrable evidence nor scientific consensus. It nonetheless strikes many citizens as an obvious truth, partly because it conforms to the Cartesian premises of the modern era, which think of communication as a transfer of information between self-contained subjectivities.

The same communicative roles that management theorists often ascribe to managers and workers are attributed by antigovernment ideologues to citizens and government. Citizens and their elected representatives are depicted as having more or less reasonable expectations that they communicate to the bureaucracy, whereas administrative agencies are accused of ignoring or circumventing these directives to protect their own resources and power. Although this image of the relationship between citizens and government is contradicted by decades of research on public opinion and voting (deHaven-Smith, 1998), it is seldom questioned by political elites, who tacitly embrace it in their support for performance measurement.

Unlike popular accounts of language and communication, the theory of communicative action leads to a new understanding of democracy that recognizes the important role played by administrative agencies, not merely in implementing legislative mandates, but in contributing to the public discourse that precedes and accompanies legislative decisions. The theory of communicative action challenges the conveyance model of communication by pointing out that all communication inevitably relies on unstated communicative norms and a vast body of taken-for-granted background knowledge. Hence, communication is not a transfer of facts and mental images from one mind to another but an activation of signals within a shared web of meaning that is always being communicatively reproduced, extended, and adapted.

Habermas argues that the trajectory of progress that is evident in human history—and is evident in the historical growth and refinement of technical knowledge, moral insight, and artistic expression—is a function of periodic, crisis-driven expansions of the range of background premises that are subjected to formal discursive examination or, to use Habermas's terminology, "institutionalized learning processes" (1973, 18–24). The imperialistic nation-states of the late Middle Ages institutionalized discourse on such matters as law and Christian faith, but they foreclosed scientific inquiry that might encroach on religious doctrines. Modern democracy is rightly judged to be an advance over its predecessor, not only because it removed dogmatic constraints on science but also because, in the discursive activity surrounding elections and lawmaking, it institutionalized public discourse about the nature, operation, and proper course of the social order (Habermas 1973, 21–24).

When modern representative government is understood in terms of communicative action rather than information conveyance, the criteria for judging the administrative organs of government expand beyond compliance and performance to include discursive learning and communicative competency.

Administrative agencies in modern democracies are no longer mischaracterized as functionaries of an enlightened electorate and its elected representatives; they are recognized as centers of discourse and experimentation dedicated to matters of significant public concern, the findings of which play (or potentially play) a critical role in public discourse among elites and in the collective will formation of mass publics. The central consideration for public administration theory and practice, therefore, becomes how and to what extent administrative discourse contributes to the larger public discourse in which it is embedded.

This consideration highlights aspects of public administration that, although visible and obviously important, have not been thematized in theory and research. For example, much of the controversy over the Bush administration's decision to go to war in Iraq hinged on accusations that administrative discourse in the intelligence agencies had been distorted by White House pressure and that the intelligence received by the administration had been inaccurately portrayed in public discourse. Similar concerns about administrative discourse and public discourse arose when Vice President Dick Cheney refused to cooperate with congressional inquiries into the origins of the administration's energy policies. Cheney justified his refusal on the grounds that administrative decision making would be inhibited in the future if the requested information were released. Clearly, public officials are concerned about the nature, quality, and role of administrative discourse in politics and policy making, even if many management scholars and antigovernment ideologues are preoccupied with administrative efficiency and control.

The theory of communicative action also allows us to see that the relationship between public discourse and administrative discourse involves more than just empirical claims about public problems and administrative performance. Equally important are responsibility and authenticity. Again, the controversy surrounding the war in Iraq is both familiar and instructive.

Questions were raised not only about the administration's assessment of the situation—that is, about Iraq's military capabilities, connections to al-Qaeda, compliance with UN directives, and so on—but also about the administration's motives and authority. Journalists, scholars, and members of Congress suggested the war might have been motivated by oil, that the attacks of September 11 might have served as a pretext to justify American imperialism, and that the law authorizing the president to initiate war might have violated the

Constitution's requirement that war be declared by Congress.

The theory of communicative action calls for revisions to public administration theory and practice that would recognize, facilitate, and protect the integrity of administrative discourse and its role in public deliberations. A discursive model of public administration would remove the conceptual ground in which antigovernment, pro-business prejudices are now rooted. It would also foster a more accurate and positive identity for public administration as a profession, which has been smeared by the same attitudes that gave pejorative overtones to the words "bureaucrat" and "bureaucratic."

In the meantime, the concept of inquirment opens a terminological door to new and different forms of administrative discourse in the existing context of American government. Management by inquiry is a powerful administrative technique, but it is likely to be misused unless its reliance on universal communicative norms is appreciated and respected. The concept of inquirment is intended to enhance awareness of this normative backdrop and to distinguish the general framework of discursive accountability from specific management techniques that use inquirments in particular ways. We hope this will promote experimentation with discursive accountability processes while sensitizing managers to the democratic values these processes should serve.

## Notes

1. In 1996, the process used in New York City (Compstat) won the Innovations in American Government Award from the Ford Foundation and the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. Agencies using the approach include the cities of Indianapolis, Louisville, Boston, Baltimore, Newark, and New Orleans; Prince George's County, Maryland; the sheriff's offices in Broward, Orange, and Polk counties (Florida), Seattle, Los Angeles, Hickory (North Carolina), and Philadelphia; and the state police in Illinois and Delaware (Straub and O'Connell 2000, 7; Walsh 2001, note 2).
2. For accounts of Compstat's origins, see Bratton and Knobler (1998), Maple and Mitchell (1999), Safir (1997), and Silverman (1999). The term "Compstat" is short for "computer comparison statistics" (Walsh, 2001, note 1).
3. The Broward Sheriff's Office refers to the process by different names depending on the divisions involved. For simplicity's sake, this article refers to the process in general as PowerTrac.
4. For illustrative statements in management theory about the importance of control systems, sanctions, and incentives, see the following: on strategic management, see Rue and Holland (1986, 65,

620–25); on responsibility-centered management, see McBride, Neiman and Johnson (2000); on performance-based contracting, see Lu (1999) and Lu and Donaldson (2000); on performance-based budgeting in education, see Layzell (1999); and on performance-based pay, see O'Donnell (1998).

5. Detailed accounts include Walsh (2001), Maple and Mitchell (1999), Bratton and Knobler (1998), Kelling and Coles (1996), and Safir (1997). Since 1997, when PowerTrac was initiated in the Broward Sheriff's Office, Broward County's crime rate has declined 53 percent, and 100,000 hours of overtime have been saved (Billings, 2003).
6. Site visits to New York and Baltimore were conducted in May 2001 to watch their discursive accountability processes in action and to conduct interviews with process participants and policy makers. A site visit with interviews was conducted in London in June 2002.
7. An exception is total quality management (TQM), which uses communication to assess and improve work processes. As it is now practiced, TQM is not designed to steer large organizations but to improve unit performance within a preexisting system of command and control. Although top managers may use TQM concepts rhetorically (Zbaracki 1998), communication in TQM is mainly horizontal rather than vertical, that is, the exchange takes place within administrative units rather than up and down the chain of command (Sewell 1998). Moreover, as Hackman and Wageman (1995) demonstrate, business firms using TQM often fail to include data collection and scientific assessments. Methods for combining TQM with hierarchical command-and-control systems have been suggested by Sewell (1998), Manz and Steward (1997), Flood (1995), and Reger et al. (1994). These methods share some similarities with inquiry-centered management but not its essence, which is a discursive accountability process.
8. In PowerTrac and Compstat, the inquirment sessions are conducted by a board of about 10 top executives sitting at a U-shaped table. Among them is the chief or sheriff. The process is observed by an audience of about 20 people who sit in the background behind the board. The unit commander stands behind a podium that faces the board and the audience. The room is darkened except for a light shining on the unit commander and small desk lamps placed at intervals around the board's U-shaped table. These features have some similarity to those used by law enforcement officers when interrogating suspects, and the process itself is based on standard investigative and interrogative techniques, which involve

probing for details, looking for inconsistencies, and checking out claims.

9. For a concise statement of the theory of communicative action, see Habermas (2001). A much longer account is found in Habermas (1981). For his application of the theory to social and political problems in modern society, see Habermas (1973).
10. These include, for example, the workloads of deputies on patrol, the paperwork required of sergeants, and the political considerations important to elected officials and top managers.

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