

## THE EMERGENCE OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AS A TOOL FOR PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

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**Abstract:** A synoptic overview of public administration as a developed profession, a brief history of the evolution of management thought, coupled with seminal academic contributions that integrate theory with practice, and a discussion and justification for the development of essential technical, human and conceptual skills required for successful management in contemporary society.

**Keywords:** Public Administration origins, theory and practice conceptual skills, technical skill, human skill, professionalization, and sustainability.

**Recommended for Undergraduate and Graduate Courses:** Introduction to Public Administration/Management; Case study Analysis; and, Organizations Theory and Behavior

### Introduction

The pursuit of knowledge and skill in the field of public administration is a noble endeavor, yet one that should not be undertaken lightly. Public Administrators, as public servants, are entrusted with immeasurable power, and charged with providing the services that lawmakers mandate each local, state, or federal government provide on behalf of the general population. These services, designed for contemporary society, are often rendered through the creation, implementation, or maintenance of public policies that are imposed upon absolutely everyone, and ultimately have enormous impact on most areas of all lives. It is because of the far-reaching effects of the creation and implementation of these policies that it is imperative that the aspirational Public Administrator have a strong foundational knowledge of the field, and be diligent in pursuit of understanding how policy creation or implementation can impact change and alter the course of life for the general public.

The origins of public administration as an educational and professional endeavor are deeply rooted in state, and urban or municipal government. American Public Administration specifically, is grounded in “electoral democracy”, and as a field it is charged with obtaining results, while being accountable and responsible (Ma

& Hou, 2009). Consequently, both education and practice must then encourage and demand that practitioners, while seeking to create impact and affect change, be both accountable and responsible. It is to this end, the development of a strong foundational knowledge and understanding of the field, that the included information and case studies have been designed. Through the use of real-life case studies, future public administrators will be given opportunities to learn, practice, and fine-tune their skills, specifically in areas of technical, human, and conceptual skill development, so as to ensure the most capable wielding of the power entrusted to them.

### **Management is Like Methuselah--Old**

The idea of public administration, as it is known in contemporary terms, has a long history. The origins of public administration in this sense can be traced to Near Eastern Culture such as Hammurabi in Babylon with a code of 282 laws (Harper, 1904, cited in Wren, 1979)). The ancient Chinese established a bureaucracy to administer as early as 1000 B.C. (Wren, 1979). General Sun Tzu in his classic treatise, advocated extensive discussion and sound plans before going into battle: “Thus do many calculations [plans] lead to victory, and few calculation to defeat.” (Wren, 1979). And, in many of the earliest dynasties of Korea, there were national civil service tests administered that were essential to gaining positions in either the military or government. The first national examinations were administered in the Kingdom of Silla in 788. Later on, other dynasties administered competitive examinations in the areas of administration, the military, literacy and miscellaneous areas, such as medicine, geography, translation, and astronomy for advancement positions in society (<https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Gwageo>, July 17, 2019)

The Egyptians also understood the principles of management, such as, unity of command, span of management, division of labor, and basic—albeit authoritarian principles of leadership—as shown in extant documents and excavations (Wren, 1979). Egypt too created a bureaucracy to administer public works as irrigation canals and other public structures are known today (Wren, 1979). The Biblical Hebrews and Greece also had governmental structures to manage public affairs. For example, in Hebrew thought the **vizier** was given temporal matters and to the pharaoh the spiritual powers were reserved to himself (Wren, 1979). These are but a few of earliest principles of management recorded in history: Delegation of authority, forecasting, planning, and as Wren notes, the establishment of a professional “...full-time administrator to control and coordinate the state enterprise” (Wren, 1979).

Ali Farazmand has informed us about administration and management principles beginning as early as 6000 B.C. in his discussion of the Elanites and the Achaeminid Empire (more recent, 59-330 B.C); they are both instructive in the areas of state building and administration. To recap his exhaustive inventory of practices, concepts and principles of management that were precursors to modern management goes well beyond the central thesis of this paper. However, a

summation of these practices is shown in the following list: taxation policy (revenue generation), civil service hiring through merit (career) and patronage appointments, long-range strategic planning, emergency management, professionalization of the bureaucracy (rules provided by a “Guild System”), and capital and developmental investment techniques (Farazmand, 2003)

The early Persian cultural orientation built a dominant, middle-class, Persian bureaucracy, whose power was checked to ensure equity and efficiency and truth telling. The telling of a lie was a crime subject to punishment and it was more disgraceful than owing indebtedness—one was prone to tell lies if one owed money. The issues of management and administration that were found in antiquity remain today modern administration: The concepts of centralization vs. decentralization (federalism and intergovernmental relations); tax policy, the role of quasi-governmental institutions, the rise and control of bureaucracies and the abuse of power. In addition, time management, anti-waste and corruption policies, infrastructure development and maintenance issues (roads, irrigation systems, water management, natural resources management, harbors, postal services, waterways), self-government and partnership-based arrangements (collaborative government), contracting-out, bringing women into management, and a host of other concerns were on the Persian agenda 2500 years ago (Farazmand, 2003).

On a broader contextual basis, many of the management concepts in use today evolved from ancient civilizations—Western, Eastern and African. Although they have evolved to new levels today, in a primitive sense, they formed the basis for organization (hierarchy of authority, division of labor (370 B.C.), scalar chain, span of control, assurance quality control (City of Ur in Samaria (modern day Iraq), identified leadership traits and skills (innate vs. learned), controlling (accountability, evaluation, quality control), accounting principles (doubled-entry bookkeeping), etc. Indeed, perhaps the oldest profession is that of management! The roots of administration from these sources can be traced from the Puritans in New England to later developments after the adoption of the Constitution.

The need for administration, even in ancient societies, resulted from complexities of people living together in communities. Institutions such as churches added to the growth of administration as they created hierarchies intended to bring order to the activities they guided. Tribal societies also had forms of administration with roles for members such as chief and lower ranking roles. Ancient Asian and South Asian societies also matured to levels requiring laws, administration of same, and individuals who would administer them. As complexities of societies grew generated in large part by increasing populations, leaders needed “wisdom”, intelligence, and some form of administration skill. Persons filling administrators must be primarily born with these characteristics since there was limited education about administration as it is known today. While some schooling was known in the ancient world, the primary subject matter would have been philosophy as seen in the Greek approach.

### **A Brief History of Public Administration**

The birth and development of the field of public administration in the United States, results largely from the Reform Movement's efforts to create accountability and efficiency. As early as 1885, the expansion of public services led to a call for efficiency (Ma & Hou, 2009). This call resulted in the National Municipal League's campaign, under the leadership of Edward S. Childs, to enact a model Municipal Charter for the purposes of generating greater accountability for municipal governments. The National Municipal League and the Thirteen-Thirteen (1313) Group were predominant leaders in the reform movement overall, and as such, subsequently advanced the field of Public Administration through their leadership. Additionally, throughout this campaign the New York City Bureau of Municipal Research also played a prominent role, specifically in advancing budget reform for greater accountability beginning in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Ma & Hou, 2009).

Professionalization of public administration, begins with education. It is through education that a body of knowledge and its ideas are, in the words of Sager, et al, transferred (Sager, et al., 2018). Beyond the call for education in public administration by Woodrow Wilson, the delivery of formal course work in the field can be found in work of Leonard D. White who is credited by Wren (Wren, 1979) with delivering the first classroom course in public administration and would later teach public personnel coursework focused on government offices. In his article "Paradigm Lost: Public Administration at Johns Hopkins University, 1884-1896", Curtis M. Hoffman shows how Herbert Baxter Adams, James Bryce, Richard Ely, Albert Shaw, and Woodrow Wilson "participated" in the early attempts at creating an entire curriculum in public administration (Hoffman, 2002). These early attempts to educate public servants owe some credit to the antecedents of the ancient world. Further, the movement to generate education with a body of knowledge to be taught by faculty is the beginning of one stage of the professionalization of public administration.

Other strong initial influences in the field of public administration include Charles Merriam and Louis Brownlow, both committed democrats, who were instrumental in professionalizing public administration through the Thirteen-Thirteen (1313) Group experience. According to Barry D. Karl, both Merriam and Brownlow were "crucial bridge figures in the formation of public policy in the United States transitioning from the chaos of amateur judgments they knew in the 19<sup>th</sup> century regionalist conglomeration of multiple governments to the highly professionalized, highly nationalized systems we know today." (Barry, 1975). Merriam's book "A More Intimate View of Urban Politics" is a prime example of what both of these reformers strove to create in the newly developing field despite

the fact that the issues faced by the reformers were no less daunting than those faced by contemporary Public Administration and local government today.

Ultimately, all of these individuals or entities were instrumental in creating educational and practical improvements for local, particularly municipal, government, with one of the most influential and lasting changes made to the field (in its entirety) being to associate education and practice. To this day, education remains connected to practice in the field of Public Administration, and this linkage between the two must continue indefinitely, especially given the number of state and local government employees in the United States.

According to the Rockefeller Institute of Government, there were 22 million government jobs in 2009 (Boyd, 2009). Most of those government jobs exist at the state and local level, and the largest majority of them are concentrated in education (McDonnell & [Salisbury](#), 2005). The education sector is followed (in terms of numbers of employees) by the service and health sectors, the criminal justice department, the transportation sector, the parks and recreation department, the housing sector, the community development sector, the electric and gas utilities, and finally by general administration jobs (Boyd, 2009). With the vast number of these jobs impacting governance at the state and local levels, it is imperative that the issues faced by state and local government administrators, many of which will be detailed here, be addressed through the portal of efficient and accountable public management borne of a combination of education and practice, and that this linkage be sustained.

### **The Professionalization of Public Management**

The development of competencies, via both education and practice, in managing complex government organizations, whether they be local, state, or special governments, requires growth through professionalization beginning with education. A profession must have a discrete body of knowledge according to Barker (2010). He also writes that professional education allows a student “to master” a body of knowledge delivered by educators plus provide formal assessment. (Barker, 2010).

Woodrow Wilson had in mind professionalization of the field of Public Administration when he published his seminal article in 1887, however, once education was coupled with practice, public management quickly became an educational endeavor with a practitioner focus, or a dually founded/focused field.

Within this modified (or dually founded/focused) field of study, Frederick Winslow Taylor may be the best known of the early public management advocates, due in part to his time and motions studies emphasizing efficiency economy, and productivity (Holtzer & Zhang, 2009). These studies were early innovations, yet despite modifications, advancements, refinements, and adaptations implemented from other disciplines, it is clear that the field of public management still has not been fully realized in the past 120 years. This sentiment is echoed by Kate Jenkins,

who reports there is still too little management competence in public service (Jenkins, 2008). Jenkins report takes on added significance, when one recognizes that in the United States the majority of the control of policy and policy implementation is through the purview of state and local governments. Jenkins viewpoint is also supported by Caiden and Sundaram, who write that there is a “universal recognition of the decline of public services and the need for reforms” (Caiden & Sundaram, 2004).

Toward this end, according to Tolofari, (Tolofari, 2003) governments around the world became involved and continue to engage in reform, recognizing as a driving force economic stagnation. Tolofari states that during this same time “education was also reformed”, thus requiring that the lessons from this period endure and continue to be updated and continually relearned, with research consistently made available to augment these lessons as the economic circumstances of the present era are equally, if not more pressing. Public administrators must similarly be informed of and skilled in addressing such issues as community sustainability, citizen satisfaction, and the organization and delivery of public services.

### **Technical, Human and Conceptual Skill Building**

In part, to develop as a leader in the field, one must consider all a leader or aspirational public administrator must come to know. Taking into account the established link between education and practice, as illustrated above, skill development could also be divided into three areas of emphasis – that of technical skill, human skill, and conceptual skill. The use of case studies as experiential learning opportunities will allow for the practice portion of skill development in each of these areas.

#### **Technical skill**

Technical skill is likely the most readily recognizable and concretely developable skill, as most professions require a level of technical skill in one or more areas as a condition of basic employment. Technical skills typically involve working with “things” or processes, and tend to describe or imply “an understanding of, and proficiency in, a specific kind of activity, particularly one involving methods, processes, procedures, or techniques” (Katz, 1974). The development of technical skill infers that future public administrators will have or develop a specialized knowledge in and a capacity to use their unique knowledge in their specified discipline for the good of the greater public.

The importance of technical skill to the field of public administration is exemplified through several examples of public service sectors that are reliant on technical skill, namely the education or health care sectors. There are also technical skill sets that are imperative to the effective implementation of public



service, however, that do not remain constricted to a specific service sector, and instead seep into all areas of public administration. This is the case with financial management and budgeting, and is the example that will be used to illustrate technical skill development further in the following paragraphs.

As economic success and growth cannot be guaranteed across any locality, state, or nation, and appropriations by law for spending are politically determined, budgeting must be a primary task in the effective governance of public programming. Some would even argue that efficient financial stewardship and budgeting are primary issues that affect the long-term success of cities, towns, counties, and states. Having said that, these two public management areas for those in the public sector, consume a majority of the time they spend at work, and as multi-faceted management tasks, are ones that require technical skill.

With financial stewardship and budgeting being imperative elements in the success of any public endeavor, public administrators must consider all means by which to ensure sustainable financial security. While the ongoing pursuit of revenue streams to offset the expenditures of public programs and the enticement of big business growth to a community can be helpful, they are not always the best solutions. Public administrators then, while simultaneously considering these possibilities, must also concern themselves with the concept of lean management.

Lean management is primarily concerned with the idea of efficiency, and offers the approach most likely to create the various kinds of non-revenue generating solutions required for the effective financial management that states, counties, and localities require. This means that public administrators need to “think lean,” and begin by taking into account value chain analysis within their enterprise. Value chains are established and focused with the “end user” in mind, and seek to eliminate unnecessary processes, correct service process errors, remove “bottlenecks” in the provision of service, and employ technology to ensure the most efficient service experience. An end user, such as a citizen seeking Medicare coverage, a resident seeking a title search on a property or birth record, or an employee of a city, county, or state who needs information from the information technology, payroll, or human resources departments, all expect an efficient service experience and this is largely obtained through the use of lean thinking.

Lean thinking, financial stewardship, and budgeting, as mentioned before, are technical skills, however, the good news is that these skills (as with most technical skills) can be learned. Public administrators can become accustomed to using these skills strategically; using lean thinking to transform their organizational structures from 19<sup>th</sup> Century bureaucratic organizations to value chain based entities, to develop a lean culture as part of their enterprise, and to empower employees to create new time savings, and, subsequently spending savings for their organizations. Public administrators of all types can use these technical skills to remove observable barriers to the provision of service as a

management solution, they can emphasize the use of lean management techniques as expense reduction strategies, and they can ultimately maintain or even improve the quality of results for the “end user”. Ultimately, the effective use of financial management, lean thinking, and budgeting technical skills result in greater accountability and responsibility for Public administrators while simultaneously improving the efficiency of service, and lead to a culture of effective financial stewardship and budgeting for programs through value chains organization and away from using the budget as a revenue forecast.

### **Human Skill**

In contrast to the development or implementation of technical skill, human skills require the development of skills that public administrators need to work most effectively with people: as a leader, a team member, with their colleagues, direct reports, and supervisors. These skills can be difficult to illustrate, and even more difficult to develop as human skill requires proficiency in many different areas, i.e. communication, cooperation or collaboration with others, negotiation, etc., however, human skill is “primarily concerned with working with people” (Katz, 1974). It is demonstrated in “the way individuals perceive (and recognize the perceptions of) superiors, equals, and subordinates” (Katz, 1974), and in how individuals subsequently behave or respond to those perceptions.

The development of human skill is founded on a level of self-awareness and understanding of an individual’s own “attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs about other individuals and groups” (Katz, 1974), and on their ability to recognize the usefulness and limitations of these perceptions while simultaneously accepting and willingly exploring the “viewpoints, perceptions, and beliefs (of others) which are different from their own” (Katz, 1974). This understanding of their own and other’s perceptions helps to guide communication, and direct behavior, and allows for the minimization of conflict or misunderstanding. Individuals with strong human skills can “create an atmosphere of approval and security” (Katz, 1974), and can encourage participation in the “planning and carrying out of those things which directly affect them (or the team)” (Katz, 1974). They are “sensitive to the needs and motivations of others” (Katz, 1974), and are skilled in the anticipation of potential reactions to various courses of action thus allowing for them to better guide organizational growth through their shrewd understanding of the people (and their needs) who will be impacted by their decisions.

As mentioned previously, human skill can be difficult to develop, but is an imperative skill for public administrators to master. Human skill should be implemented with consistency and fidelity, and it should be recognized that “everything that is said or done (or is left unsaid or undone) has an affect” (Katz, 1974) on those around them. It is this idea that makes it imperative that future public administrators demonstrate, as “an integral part of their whole being” (Katz, 1974), human skill in their interactions with those around them to be of utmost



effect. One area in particular, that of leadership, is a vital human skill used in conducting the public's business.

The development of public administrators as leaders is key to highly effective public management. Public administrators who acknowledge and utilize their knowledge of self and their understanding of the perceptions of others, set the tone, establish the culture, and provide a clear vision of where the organization is going and what must be done to achieve the desired result. Aspirational leaders in a state or local government strive to overcome the "we have always done it this way" attitude, and seek to establish and adhere to the pursued agenda to attain the strategic organizational purpose while maintaining a strong knowledge of how to work well with others. Public administrators who strive toward leadership seek to build the adaptability of the city, county or state government administration, they seek to improve human resources, incorporate communication, and they build trust between government entities and between government entities and their constituents. All of these tasks require the development of strong human skills—an essential and protracted endeavor.

A strong foundation of leadership must be established and take precedent before leaders can move on to take any additional steps, which will be required, to make the local or state government effective and ultimately sustainable. Following the establishment of a firm foundation, leaders can then begin a close analytical examination of how the government operates, not only in times of economic stress, but also long-term. This analysis is important for a multitude of reasons, and required if success and sustainability are to be realized and sustained.

As a leader, moving the change agenda forward should include laying out a clear vision that others can follow, collaborating with colleagues and empowering those within the enterprise to take the actions necessary to ensure the success of the vision, and then measuring the impact the intended public service had on those who were served. When pursuing the proposed vision and/or sustainability agenda for an organization, community, or governmental entity, it is important to consider the resources currently available (perhaps utilizing the technical skills discussed previously). The evaluation of need and the allocation of existing resources, as well as consideration for how these allocations affects the proposed vision and/or sustainability agenda must also be taken into account, and this is largely done through measurement.

Measurement is a critical element of "program capacity" and serves as a tool to evaluate impact. Measurement evaluates performance, and requires an instrument, i.e. a scale or "yardstick", in order to evaluate the intended programmatic influence. It is important to note that measurement is not merely counting, as this will not tell us anything about the influence of the performance on a community or initiative. For example, counting the number of citizens served, or the number of sidewalks repaired within a community does nothing to tell us about the satisfaction level of the communities' citizens, or about the appearance

or citizen perception of the sidewalks repaired. In attempting to ascertain impact in these areas, a measurement scale or tool must be utilized and the performance of the community leader or governmental entity or service must be evaluated specifically for the intended impact. Having said that, despite the use of “tools” to measure impact, the reliance of accurate data regarding the impact of any program is still reliant on a public administrator’s use of human skill as the measurement of impact is often evaluated through collaboration with others, and through the collection of opinions and impact statements from those being served. A community cannot change what does not work without first measuring impact, and this, in the end, is accomplished through human skill and interaction.

Ultimately, a leader must model the change he or she wishes to see enacted. They must be grounded in the full understanding of their own beliefs and biases, and they must be able to understand and recognize the beliefs, needs, and perceptions of those around them. They must pursue the development of a strong foundation built upon capacity development, communication and trust, and they must actively establish vision, and lead and empower those around them to support the proposed change agenda even in the face of challenge. They must understand and effectively evaluate, through measurement, their progress and impact in the community, and use this information to create change initiatives when the desired impact is not being observed. These skills can be readily developed through careful case study and problem centered learning exercises.

### **Conceptual Skill**

Finally, by contrast to both technical skill and human skill described above, conceptual skill is more concerned with being able to see the “big picture”. This means that future public administrators must develop the capacity to comprehend how all functions and processes depend on one another, and how changes to those functions or processes impact or alter the functioning of any and/or all other parts of an enterprise, whether that be an organization, a community collaborative, or a local, state or national government. The individual who is skilled conceptually should be capable of extending this “big picture” visualization to their entire industry, and can take into account the “political, social, and economic forces of the nation on the whole” (Katz, 1974) thus allowing them to guide decision making in such a way to ensure the welfare of their entire constituency.

Some say that the development of conceptual skill is the “unifying, coordinating ingredient of the administrative process, and of undeniable over-all importance” (Katz, 1974). Consider that it is through conceptual skill that an individual or enterprise is able to see the bigger picture, understand how every part influences all other parts, and subsequently make decisions that ensure success. It is through conceptual skill that individuals can envision a future course of action for their organization, community or government and take action that will move

their enterprise forward. In addition, as it is (again) through conceptual skill that leaders are able to set the tone as they are making decisions and leading the charge toward progress; the development of conceptual skill is imperative for every aspirational public administrator. Ultimately, it is through an individual's exercise of conceptual skill that the apparent success of any organizational endeavor is assured.

While most areas of public administration will require some level or combination of all three types of skill (technical, human, and conceptual), one example of an area where conceptual skill is needed in state and local government is when considering a community's capacity for sustainability. Some would say that this is perhaps the most significant issue facing contemporary society, and state and local governments today. While sustainability initiatives can be quite complicated and encompass many facets including diversified revenue sources, green technology, green residential development, and green infrastructure to name just a few, conceptually, sustainability is merely a set of formulaic steps. Peter York of TCC calls these steps the sustainability formula. The sustainability formula York writes about is comprised of the following elements:

**LEADERSHIP + ADAPTABILITY + PROGRAM CAPACITY = SUSTAINABILITY**

In the equation described by York, of particular note is the fact that sustainability is not a "stand alone" result of a single effort but rather a combination of multiple elements. In this formula, people must come first (human skill), followed by program work requiring resources (technical skill) to achieve the desired conceptual projection or outcome i.e. in this case sustainability. In this example, technical and human skill combine to ensure an organization's ability to implement their conceptual skills for the good of the enterprise. It is important to note however, that no singular skill set is any less important than any other is; rather the public administrator's leadership capacity and the technically skillful use of resources such as revenue are supplementary or foundational to the developed capacity of the organization to absorb change.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, a public administrator must have a strong foundation in the history of the field, they must be educated in and pursuing opportunity for professionalization in their field, and they must actively seek to develop and continually refine their technical, human, and conceptual skills in order to most effectively wield the power granted to them as Public Administrators. Having said that, all of the work, effort and skill development needs to remain secondary to one of the most foundational reasons for which to pursue a position in the field, that of service to constituents. It is this service that must continue to be a public administrator's utmost priority, and toward this end, we conclude with a brief story

about a special group of Olympians who uniquely illustrate the ideal of service, and the pursuit of success for all.

“There was a story going around about the Special Olympics. For the hundred-yard dash, there were nine contestants, all of them so called physically or mentally disabled. All nine of them assembled at the starting line and, at the sound of the gun, they took off. But one little boy didn’t get very far. He stumbled and fell and hurt his knee, and began to cry. The other eight children heard the boy crying. They slowed down, turned around, and ran back to him – every one of them ran back to him. The little boy got up and he and the rest of the runners linked their arms together and joyfully walked to the finish line. They all finished the race at the same time. And when they did, everyone in the stadium stood up and clapped and whistled and cheered for a long, long time. And you know why? Because deep down we know that what matters in this life is more than winning for ourselves. What really matters is helping others win, too, even if it means showing down, and changing our course now and then (Rodgers, 2005).”

This story serves as an inspiration to aspirational public administrators: service to the public is a noble endeavor, one that should not be undertaken lightly, and one that should be pursued with singular purpose, augmented by the overarching challenge to serve others with humility and a caring concern for their human dignity and spirit. It is unthinkable that public service would ever become anything but a profession of the highest calling; yet, in antiquity, as Brunk, Meyer, and Wilson-Gentry observed “... the ethical situation in public affairs became so bad during the late Roman Empire where politics was viewed as being so costly that it was impossible to get enough people to fill the empire’s local offices, the Emperor Maxentius finally had to make public service a punishment for certain crimes (Brunk, et.al., , 1999). The United States has a tradition of public service as a noble and honorable profession, not a punishment; hopefully, the past is not prologue!

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