

Qualifying Exam

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Public Managers

Public institution managers' core functions are to organize, control, cultivate and control government resources to achieve given objectives. The root of the very title is tells it all: To manage. The importance of being able to assess the resources and capabilities against the responsibilities or expectations can't be overstated. Having the wherewithal to adapt those resources and produce results acceptable to one's superior is challenging in today's changing environment of limited means. For this reason, managers necessarily develop plans for achievement using time, finances, personnel and other resources that are afforded to them.

Executing policies, adhering to principles, laws, rules and mandates, implementing and reporting on the progress and challenges faced are also key roles of any manager. At the end of the day, it comes down to what got done, what didn't, why or why not, and how does one do better in future efforts that determines the constant improvement necessary to evolve the governmental unit and it's staff. If things are not getting done, reassessing and reassigning sometimes becomes necessary, and training or counseling become a requisite step before progress is realized. But in the end, it comes down to what is done that defines proper management.

Among the roles of a manager, perhaps one of the most important inherent to any government organization is leadership. Leading is fundamental to successful managers. To simply take control of an organization or a unit within the bureaucracy is not sufficient. Rather, a manager must have the courage to stand behind his values, the conviction to defend acts done in good faith and furthermore to defend himself, his unit and his personnel if wrongly attacked. He must also seek out the resources and determine what can be done to improve the capacity within his area of responsibility and endeavor to improve on the vision of the organization and the direction it is heading.

Improvement is essential to all organizational growth and fulfillment of purpose. The intent to change how an organization works is often the mantra of all new managers hired or transferred into a government unit. An individual's field of experience has much to do with his outlook and how principles are applied that carry out the organization's goals. Some measure the intent to make real improvement by the commitment of personnel and resources that drive much of the actions and imposed benchmarks for success.

Challenging and cultivating personnel is another role managers need to possess to cause higher outcomes. Personnel motivation, both within and without the span of his control, is essential to productive relationships to achieve desired goals. Raising the caliber of performance and enhancing individuals under one's control through new and difficult experiences heightens the capabilities of the unit and the confidence espoused by every layer of the organization under the manager's control. Putting individuals to the test may have negative consequences and must be dealt with in earnest to ensure no one is outside the scope of their potential, but properly extended projects, reports, timetables and other quantifiable objectives. An evaluation of personnel under one's control is an important tool to motivation and future consideration for any number of personnel needs and should be encouraged at periodic and anticipated intervals.

Communication is the lifeblood of management, bringing together all aspects of the job through constant interaction and shared knowledge. This single activity occupies the vast majority of most managers' time in organizations. Poor abilities in this area can severely limit a manager where strong communication skills will inevitably raise his chances for further upward mobility and reduces unintended outcomes or problems caused by misunderstanding.

Agency heads and their designates often appoint public managers as liaisons to other agencies and government bodies, such as committees, task forces, and not-for-profit as well as profit-based organizations on behalf of their agency. They are trusted to collect information, provide insight into the activities and limitations of the agency, interact with officials and individuals, and empowered to make decisions on behalf of the head or administration.

Leadership and teamwork

The leadership required at every level of the government operations is driven from the top. The head of the government sets the pace, tempo, and principles from which every layer below him take their cue. Be it rigid or nimble, the odds are the remainder of government will apply law and policy in accordance with that philosophy.

A crucial element of public administration is developing a network of effective, skills-based individuals and grouping of talents to efficiently accomplish the diverse and dynamic governmental responsibilities. This natural function of combining talents is the very building of a team with requisite lines of responsibility.

Principles of leadership and teamwork are many and derive from many schools of thought. They include influencing and motivating personnel through positive and negative inducements that are critical to effective discipline. Whether it is direct

communication in the form of assignment, coaching, or counseling, the ability to manage expectations and productivity is essential. Delegating is a skill managers have to become accustomed to while climbing the proverbial ladder into leadership. Follow up and follow through help the organization and its members know that the manager is attuned to their assignments and conveys a feeling of interest, importance and support for what they're doing.

Perhaps one of the most difficult leadership skills is the courage to make the final decision in matters of great difficulty. Whether it recommending promotion, adverse action in discipline issues, or who to hire or fire within the government, decisions have consequences and they are squarely placed on the shoulders of the manager.

Problem Analysis, Research & Solving

Solving problems and ensuring they don't occur in the future is important to improve government. Problems emerge at all phases of government work and many are remnants from a previous incumbent's actions. Many problems are borne between a limited number of personnel or units. But when it's clear that a concern must be addressed, determining how it came to be in the first place is fundamental to the solution. Essentially, learning from past mistakes or current problems will vastly improve the operation of government.

Ascertaining the root cause of problems in organizations as large as governments is also not always easy. This is especially true when conflict occurs between individuals and spreads to uninvolved personnel. These may become volatile and even violent episodes and underscore the importance of open communication and building strong supervisor-subordinate relationships. Resolution at the earliest time and at the lowest possible level

in the organization is most desirable in nearly all cases of personnel disputes and problem solving.

A manager should obtain and assess information from all parties and relevant sources. Evaluation of the facts and individual opinions presented often proves sufficient to determine the root cause of the problem. Research of rules, laws, procedures or practices is needed for many problems. This may involve anything from talking with practitioners of the system in place, to document research to determine whose idea conceptualized the practice.

There is, on occasion, ambiguity as to the intended outcome of a policy or system. This frequently occurs when the result is different from that expected by the author of such process. I have seen situations where a single individual recommended a course of action that changed law when it was endorsed by a person in a position of influence or authority, and then adopted without objection in the legislative process during a budget session. Records of how these changes in fact exist and must be tracked to assure public transparency and accountability-and sometimes responsibility for the problem in the first place.

Finally, contemporary issues don't always mesh with past practices. When dealing with government policy systems, I've seen a number of people use the concept "Because, that's always how we've done it." These issues of how things are done, or how they came to exist in the first place, don't always follow authority, law, or a formal system. Here again, this underscores the reason that critically analyzing a problem to see whether it is best suited for today's issues is not simply an academic process. Rather, it's a deliberate need to look at one's self and the relative willingness to apply logic to problem solving. The concept that the process in place is adequate because it already

exists is not acceptable and rarely carries the day when contrasted with intelligent and critical assessments.

Environmental Relevance

The interactivity and meshing of people and policies is constant and changes how we deal with problems in public administration. What affects local governments is as much a part of what stems from the national government as how a regional or municipal government interplays with state or local government. One budget, policy, or leadership position can often affect another policy and program environment.

Finances are more often than not at the core of what determines policies and ultimately what becomes practical public administration. The ability to transform rhetoric into reality is driven by dollars and the resources those funds support. Federal, State and local programs and policies on how funds are divvied up have a direct relationship to how people's lives are affected in every socioeconomic division.

Program planning and implementation in an environment of multi-year and overlapping budgets is a very involved and complex process that requires an inordinate number of talents. The Federal government's increasing assertion that states and local governments carry their share of the cost burden also compounds this already convoluted system.

Although subordinate governments enjoy the benefits from Federal government programs that mandate they bear a portion of the cost, many have been jeopardized or not opted for at all due to the inability for governments to meet matching financial obligations. Hardships felt by populations in areas where programs are compromised for these reasons are due to assessment of inadequate revenues, which is—due to

unpredictable events—more an art than a science. These government financial hardships, whether natural or manmade, have a direct and indirect impact on how to plan for taxes, fees, and other monies needed to finance programs and operations.

Changes in leadership on the national level have also played a role in how the executive and legislative branches plan for resources in recent years. The election of President Obama and his policies of adaptive universal healthcare for the nation had profound implications on the size of the Federal government and programs available for states and other territories. These executive-driven policies, coupled with a struggling national economy on the heels of a near economic depression, has severely impacted the national debt and influenced what might be characterized as ultra-conservative thinking.

The Tea Party has become a lightning rod for media attention and those in the US political scene. Although not considered a legitimate political party, it's loosely led core values contrast the Republican party and even more so the Democrat party. Tea Party views include limits on taxation, less government spending and some return of powers to the states as a method of reducing the size of the Federal government, which has grown significantly in recent years. The political landscape driven by these outside forces also affects how our government provides for its people.

Local legislative leadership often also has reverberation in the national government and can guide the discussion in regional issues as well. When a person of some stature or duration in public service makes pronouncements, others are listening and watching to see how they will respond to such declarations. These statements and actions influence public opinion, media coverage, which may create momentum in how an issue is perceived. It is always interesting to see how either an organized effort to drive public

sentiment or a natural groundswell of support can also affect how a community evolves or devolves in a topic area of public administration, such as healthcare or education.