

Public Management Report

An occasional (and maybe insightful) examination of the issues, dilemmas, challenges, and opportunities in leadership, governance, management, and performance in public agencies.

On why public managers need to:

Fix the Dissatisfiers First

Why are citizens unhappy with government? There are a wide variety of possible reasons: Government policy is wrong (which may suggest that it's not my policy). Government is spending money on the wrong things (which may suggest that it's not spending it on my things). Government is spending too much money (which may suggest that it's spending it on too many things that aren't mine). Government is wasting money (which may suggest that I want government to spend the money only in very circumscribed ways). Government is stealing money (which may suggest that I forgot that I voted for the wrong people).

There exist numerous reasons why citizens are unhappy with government—from the ideological to the practical to the forgetful.

Still, there can be one more reason why citizens are unhappy with government: They see private organizations doing some things well—making the lines at a service counter work smoothly; dealing with people courteously—and ask, “Why can't government work like that?”

Now, obviously, not every business has made every encounter with every customer an easy, pleasant, and productive experience. When I complained to an agent of British Airways why I had been unable to reserve a

seat as I can do on most other airlines, the response was quite telling. “You have to think of us as a large government.” In that sentence, the agent was saying two quite distinct things. First: we are a very large organization, with all of the well-known problems that come with being a large organization. Second: to understand the character of these large-organization problems, just look at government.



In fact, not all of the public sector's managerial challenges reflect the uniqueness of government. Many exist simply because public agencies tend to be large; they possess all of the managerial problems that confront any large organization. Thus, the managers of any public agency need to distinguish between these two types of problems: those that are unique to government, and those that are common to all large organizations.

Moreover, before trying to solve all of the problems that are unique to government, the management team of an agency may want to attack those problems that are common to large organizations. After all, some (though certainly not all) corporations have remedied these large-organization problems. For any large-organization problem, there exists one or several businesses that have solved it—or, at least, found a way to mitigate it. They have developed both the needed concepts and the accompanying technology. Why not borrow it?

The classic case is the division of motor vehicles, the organization that issues both driver and vehicle licenses. This agency's mission is to protect the safety of drivers, passengers, cyclists, and pedestrians. That's why government tests the drivers and vehicles. The agency cannot prevent every accident. But if it adopts regulations that intelligently codify the legislation, and if it implements these regulations effectively, the motor vehicle agency can help to improve safety.

But when citizens come into contact with this agency, they are not thinking about public-policy impacts—about how government is enhancing safety. Rather, they have two, very personal concerns. How long must I wait? And, what will my picture look like?

These two personal worries have nothing to do with safety. But they have everything to do with citizen perception of government. If the line takes forever, or if the picture looks like a mug shot, the citizen will be unhappy.

It will not make any difference how much safety has improved. If citizens think that the lines are too long or the pictures too ugly, they will be dissatisfied with this agency in particular and thus with government in general.

The leaders of public agencies are driven by the desire to have an impact. They aspire to achieve their agency's mission—and to have citizens recognize these accomplishments. Yet, before public managers can convince citizens that their agency and their government is actually doing a good (let alone excellent) job, they have to fix the dissatisfiers.

In 1968, Frederick Herzberg wrote a classic article for the *Harvard Business Review*: "One More Time: How Do You Motivate Employees." Nearly four decades later, it is still *HBR's* best-selling reprint. In this article, Herzberg made a clear distinction between the factors that satisfy and motivate people and

those that dissatisfy and thus demotivate them. Moreover, Herzberg emphasized, the dissatisfiers that can demotivate people cannot necessarily be used to motivate them.

A classic dissatisfier is working conditions. If such conditions are poor, employees will be dissatisfied and thus demotivated. But, cautions Herzberg, when managers improve working conditions—when they eliminate this dissatisfier—they should not think that they will have motivated anyone.

Rather, all management has done is erased a problem—a nasty sore point with the employees. Still, fixing the dissatisfiers does give management a chance to employ one of the satisfiers, such as responsibility or recognition, to actually motivate people.

Similarly, at the division of motor vehicles, the line and the picture are citizen dissatisfiers. The long lines and mug-shot pictures suggest that the agency is incompetent. If citizens believe that the agency is incapable of handling these simple, administrative tasks (that many a business has shown can be fixed), they will not give it credit for having any mission-oriented impact on safety.

To convince citizens that government is doing a good job, public managers have to fix the dissatisfiers first. **B**

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At the division of motor vehicles, the long lines and mug-shot pictures make citizens unhappy. Until agency managers eliminate such dissatisfiers, citizens will not give them credit for any mission-oriented impact on safety.