

Public Personnel Management

Current Concerns,
Future Challenges

Edited by
Carolyn Ban
Norma M. Riccucci



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Second Edition

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INTRODUCTION

Public Personnel Management in a Time of Rapid Reform

Carolyn Ban and Norma M. Riccucci

In the time since the first edition of this book appeared in 1991, much has changed. There have been ferment and rapid reform in public management as well as in the larger social and political environment. The premise of this book is that public personnel management is an integral part of public management; thus reforms in public personnel management often reflect broader changes in public management and, indeed, changes in society as a whole.

Hence the focus of this book is not on personnel management techniques. Look elsewhere if you want detailed instructions on how to classify a position or to develop an affirmative action plan. This book approaches public personnel management from a policy perspective. It has two main goals: (1) to provide students of public personnel management with the most up-to-date information possible on the debates and issues currently shaping the field, and (2) to help students understand the process of change.

This introduction provides a framework within which all the issues discussed in the book can be placed. We begin by examining the cycles of reform in public personnel management and in public management as a whole. We then focus on current reform efforts at the federal, state, and local levels. Next we present the range of political, economic, and social changes that provide the impetus for reform; we also discuss the nature of the reform process and impediments to change. Finally we conclude with a brief description of what human resources management may look like in the future.

CYCLES OF REFORM IN PERSONNEL ADMINISTRATION

Because personnel management is an integral part of public management, reforms in personnel management have paralleled development in public management generally. The creation of the merit system, with passage of the Pendleton Act in 1883, reflected societal rejection of the spoils system and acceptance of the value of a stable professional public service. Personnel techniques, such as position classification systems, sprang from the scientific management theories that were dominant in the 1920s and 1930s.

Reforms have also focused on two key themes: strengthening presidential control and improving management efficiency. Early reformers, from the Keep Commission (in 1905) through the Brownlow Commission (in 1937), saw them as linked—an efficient but harnessed bureaucracy would provide the vehicle for political control (Garvey, 1995). By the late 1970s, popular views of government as a force for positive change were increasingly being replaced by distrust, reflected in the “bureaucrat bashing” of Presidents Carter and Reagan. Carter’s Civil Service Reform Act (CSRA) of 1978 reflects a tension between the goals of strengthening presidential control of the bureaucracy (through creation of the Senior Executive Service and simplified methods for firing federal workers) and increasing managerial efficiency.

That tension is even more evident in the recent proposals of the National Performance Review (NPR), with its emphasis on deregulation both of personnel and of other highly regulated areas of management, decentralization and devolution of authority, participative management or shared power (including Total Quality Management), and an increased focus on giving managers more authority and holding them accountable for results. Taken together, these new approaches have been called “the New Public Management.” Like many of the CSRA reforms, the New Public Management reflects the tendency to attempt to graft private sector management techniques onto the public sector. But doing so may actually undermine centralized control by the president. Indeed, Garvey argues that “[t]he NPR is mainly about governmental capacity—to the point, indeed, of carelessness about the value of control” (1995: 101). Chapter 1 addresses the NPR reforms in detail.

The recommendations of the National Commission on the State and Local Public Service (or Winter Commission), also discussed in Chapter 1, place more stress on increasing centralized administrative control while also calling for improved managerial capacity.

IMPETUS FOR REFORM

As noted earlier, the current and future challenges of public personnel administration are marked by reform. The field is constantly seeking to reform—and sometimes even reinvent—itsself in order to keep pace with the prevailing

political, social, legal, and economic tides in this nation. At every level of government we are seeing reforms in public personnel in response to permutations in resource availability, the nature of the work force, approaches to managing the work force, and the power and role of public sector unions, to mention a few. For example, Draconian cuts in federal, state, and local budgets have created pressures for governments to be more efficient in the spending and redistribution of tax dollars. These pressures, in turn, necessitate a personnel or human resources function that is capable of managing environments that are debilitated by resource scarcity, and that at the same time is able to attract and retain the best and brightest government workers. In short, public personnel administration, like its genitor, public administration, must embrace as a fundamental value managerial or economic efficiency (Rosenbloom, 1983).

In addition, we have already begun to see, as a result of overall shifts in this nation's demography, changes in the demographics of public sector work forces. Despite political, social, and legal trends that have greatly hampered the reaches of such equity policies as affirmative action, changing economic and demographic winds have compelled the business community as well as the government to develop personnel management programs and policies that enhance and promote diversity.

Moreover, new management approaches and technologies aimed at empowering government employees as well as citizens spur significant reforms to public personnel administration at the federal, state, and local levels of government. As President Bill Clinton stated in announcing the National Performance Review in March 1993, "Our goal is . . . to change the culture of our national bureaucracy away from complacency and entitlement toward initiative and empowerment" (National Performance Review 1993: 1). The National (Winter) Commission on the State and Local Public Service made similar proclamations. Monumental pressure for reform is being placed on public personnel and human resources management in that they are the purveyors of the tools, techniques, and strategies for reinventing and redesigning government service. In many public sector jurisdictions across the country, new approaches to hiring, firing, compensating, and appraising employees are emerging. Efforts to manage and improve the quality of government services also continue to remain on the agendas of public personnelists and human resources managers. And labor-management partnerships are being forged so that governments can pursue the path of least resistance in their struggles to reinvent themselves. These partnerships are changing the role that unions play in the governance of public employees.

THE NATURE OF THE REFORM PROCESS

There are several characteristics of the reform process that are important to keep in mind as one reads this book. First, the issues that reformers are facing are complex and interrelated, and they sometimes pull reformers in contradictory directions. For example, how can we deregulate the hiring process and still

ensure that we protect equity and diversity? How can we attract and motivate high-quality government employees while cutting the size and costs of government? How can we empower employees without disempowering either managers or union representatives?

Second, the process of reform is complex, involving both administrative and political processes. Some reforms can be put in place via executive action, but many others require legislative approval or must be bargained over with unions. And, as Norma Riccucci makes clear in Chapter 4, the courts also play a major role in approving, or undoing, reforms. Further, many public personnel issues are also political issues; debates over affirmative action, gay and lesbian rights, the role of unions, and pay and benefits of government workers are at the center of current political debates in our country.

Given the political nature of the debates, most of the reforms have both strong supporters and opponents. Supporters of the approaches referred to as the New Public Management see the opportunity to increase government efficiency and responsiveness. Opponents may resist change because they see their own power or interests as potentially harmed. But there is genuine opposition to such reforms as Total Quality Management (TQM; discussed in several chapters, but particularly by Evan Berman in Chapter 18) from those who see the focus on the "customer" as an inappropriate way to view the relationship between the government and citizens.

Because change is difficult and the issues are complex, the rate of change is uneven. Most of the reforms discussed in this book have been implemented in some locations. Indeed, several chapters highlight examples of successful reform. But across the 50 states and thousands of local governments, reform has proceeded at different rates, reflecting both the difficulty of securing agreement for reforms and the challenges of successfully implementing the changes. This means that our state and local governments provide a natural laboratory for studying the reform process.

HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT OF THE FUTURE

It is clear that as personnel policies change, the role of the Human Resources Office must also change. On the one hand, some reformers have called for the Human Resources Office to continue its traditional role of administering the merit system, managing the usual personnel functions of hiring, classification, administration of pay, and so forth, but to emphasize service to managers (seen as "customers" in TQM terms) and to deemphasize its traditional role of oversight and protection of the merit system (Ban, 1995).

Others have argued for a more radical redefinition of the Human Resources Office's role, seeing it as taking on new functions such as organizational development and internal consulting within the organization. Chapter 2 of this volume offers an argument for even more drastic reform. James Perry and Debra

Mesch present a model of strategic human resources management in which organizations move from a personnel unit that is isolated from the mainstream of the organization, with a focus on the technical minutiae of hiring, classification, and benefits, to a strategic human resources unit, integrated into the management of the organization, where management of human resources is seen as making a difference for the effectiveness of the organization. Many other chapters reflect both positive goals for the field and the conflicts that make studying public personnel so interesting.

Trying to keep up with a field that is changing so rapidly is a challenge for scholar and student. As we move into the next century, the one thing we can be sure of is that public personnel administration will continue to reform and reinvent itself. One would expect no less from a field that is dynamic and mutable, especially in its ability to keep up with the changing political, social, legal, and economic demands of this nation.

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Contents

Contributors *vii*

INTRODUCTION **PUBLIC PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT
IN A TIME OF RAPID REFORM**
Carolyn Ban and Norma M. Riccucci **xiii**

Acknowledgements *xviii*

SECTION I REFORM: POLITICS AND PROSPECTS **1**

CHAPTER 1 **REINVENTING PUBLIC PERSONNEL
MANAGEMENT: THE WINTER AND
GORE INITIATIVES**
Frank J. Thompson and Beryl A. Radin **3**

CHAPTER 2 **STRATEGIC HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT**
James L. Perry and Debra J. Mesch **21**

CHAPTER 3 **ACCOUNTABILITY CHALLENGES
OF DEREGULATION**
Barbara S. Romzek **35**

SECTION II CHALLENGES OF INCLUSION

55

**CHAPTER 4 WILL AFFIRMATIVE ACTION SURVIVE
INTO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY?**

Norma M. Riccucci 57

**CHAPTER 5 MODELS OF EXCELLENCE IN
WORKPLACE DIVERSITY**

Tamu Chambers and Norma M. Riccucci 73

**CHAPTER 6 COLLIDING WITH A GLASS CEILING:
BARRIERS TO THE ADVANCEMENT
OF WOMEN AND MINORITIES**

Katherine C. Naff 91

**CHAPTER 7 A LEGAL PERSPECTIVE ON SEXUAL
HARASSMENT**

Robert D. Lee Jr. and Paul S. Greenlaw 109

**CHAPTER 8 LESBIANS AND GAY MEN IN THE PUBLIC
SECTOR WORK FORCE**

Charles W. Gossett 123

**CHAPTER 9 AIDS AND DISABILITY POLICY: HOW CAN
THE PUBLIC SECTOR PREPARE ITSELF?**

James D. Slack 139

**SECTION III THE OUTLOOK FOR LABOR-MANAGEMENT
RELATIONS**

155

**CHAPTER 10 NEW ROLES, NEW STRATEGIES: REINVENTING
THE PUBLIC UNION**

George T. Sulzner 157

**CHAPTER 11 LABOR-MANAGEMENT PARTNERSHIPS IN
THE PUBLIC SECTOR**

T. Zane Reeves 173