

What Middle Managers Do in Public Organizations:
Stewardship of the Public trust and the Limits of reinventing GOVERNMENT

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abstract

Over the past decade we have witnessed a growing recognition of the important role that career public servants play in making our system of democratic governance work. However, most of this attention has focused on the discretionary role of senior level administrators. In this article we focus on the distinctive role played by middle managers in public organizations in being the "keepers of two essential questions" that are essential to the health of our democratic polity: a) helping to define "acceptable service" and b) making certain the delivery of public services is carried out in a manner that meets all of the "accountability" standards that have been put into place. We conclude that current efforts to eliminate layers of middle management through "contracting out", privatizing, reinventing government, and other mechanisms to reshape the role and function of democratic governance needs to be carefully informed and guided by a full understanding of the essential role middle managers play in maintaining the health of our democratic polity.

INTRODUCTION

The most serious resistance to teamwork and participatory management often comes from middle managers, not unions. If employees are making decisions and solving problems, middle managers become superfluous. Too often they stand in the way of actions, because their instinct, to justify their existence, is to intervene (Gaebler & Osborne, p. 265).

Middle management in most organizations really has little role beyond "make work" activities, such as stopping ideas coming down and stopping ideas going up. Middle managers...are a sponge (former United Airlines President, Ed Carlson, quoted in Peters & Waterman, 1983, p. 313).

Eliminating layers of middle management through contracting out for services and flattening organizations have become an accepted catechism of the modern management faith. It is a faith that is constantly being kindled in the public sector by recurring waves of administrative self doubt. Some of this self doubt results from financial pressures to save money by getting rid of costly layers of the organization. Other sources of self doubt include various organizational and human resource management theories, like TQM, theory Z, and project team management, which argue that employee ownership, satisfaction, and productiveness (i.e., effectiveness and efficiency) will be increased if those who produce the service/product have more direct responsibility for managing the conditions of their success (Peters & Waterman, 1983, p. 270; Cohen & Brand, 1993). More recently, administrative self doubt in the public sector has been fostered by the call to reinvent government. One of the underlying assumptions of this reinvention movement is that there will be less need for middle managers as well as direct service providers as government abandons its role of rowing in favoring of steering (Gaebler & Osborne, 1992, p. 265 ff).

Like most successful catechisms, these external sources of administrative self-doubt have served to reify the truth about the useless, costly, and even dysfunctional role middle managers have come to play in large complex organizations. As middle managers and former middle managers within such organizations we are both perplexed and concerned that so little serious attention has been given to what middle managers actually do in these organizations, especially those in the public sector. Even the writings on TQM are quite vague about the role middle managers are supposed to play in facilitating the TQM process. Frequently, no effort is made to distinguish the role of middle managers from the role of managers in general. If middle managers are mentioned at all by name, they are treated as roadblocks that need to be moved from a position of opposition, to a position of toleration and, finally, to a position of facilitation of the TQM process (Cohen & Brand, pp. 117-164). But active support by middle managers for organizational change does not really seem necessary, since their **substantive** contributions are not regarded as essential to the success of the outcome (also see, Walton, 1986; Scherkenbach, 1990; Schonberger, 1990). It is precisely this assumption we wish to challenge in this article.

In our 80 years of combined experience in the public sector, representing more than a dozen different organizations, we do not believe that it is fair to characterize middle managers as "superfluous", as "hour-glass" bottle necks in the organization, or "make work" featherbedders. In defending the role of middle managers in this paper, we do

not wish to quarrel with the obvious need to eliminate unnecessary layers of an organization or the need to increase organizational efficiency and effectiveness through more employee involvement and team management. Middle managers have received some bad publicity for some very good reasons. We agree that the traditional corporate hierarchy has tended to reward employees based on the number of individuals they supervise, thus creating excessive competition and expansion at the middle management levels of organizations. However, we do not believe that the solution to the problem is to be found in a wholesale attack on the middle management structure of organizations. We will argue in this paper that middle managers are the "keepers of essential questions" that are characteristically given short shrift by those at the operating or work group levels of public organizations.¹

We will make our argument in three parts. In Part I we will summarize what we believe are the essential generic functions middle managers perform in most all organizations, whether they be public, private, or non profit. In Parts II and III we will discuss the two peculiarly important functions middle managers perform in public sector organizations. Part II will focus on the role of middle managers in defining what counts for "acceptable" service. Part III will focus on

the role of middle managers in holding public organizations accountable to multiple and sometimes conflicting public standards. Taken together, Parts II and III argue that middle managers in the public sector have a unique responsibility in helping to define "acceptable service" and in making certain the delivery of public services is carried out in a manner that meets all of the "accountability" standards that have been put into place. Finally, in Part IV we will use some case examples to explore the extent and kind of "flattening" of hierarchies that may be appropriate in public sector organizations. We argue that it makes sense to eliminate middle managers within the public sector only for those functions that are **not essential** for achieving the core purposes of democratic governance. In short, the elimination of middle management ultimately turns on, and requires, a theory of democratic governance. We conclude with some "democratic governance" issues surrounding the role of middle managers in the public sector which, we believe, require much greater attention than they have received thus far in the discussions of "contracting out", privatizing, reinventing government, and other mechanisms to reshape the role and function of democratic governance.

Part I: What Middle Managers Do in Both Public and Private Sector Organizations

How Do We Recognize a Middle Manager When We See One?

Over the last several decades we have acquired considerable empirical information on the kind of work managers do. Largely through the integrative efforts of Henry Mintzberg, many of the conventional myths about managers have been dispelled. Contrary to popular folklore, managers are not systematic planners who rely on the assemblage of "hard information" to make decisions in a scientific fashion. Instead, they "dislike reflective activities" and rely on "soft information" to make intuitive decisions that do not conform to a scientific model (Mintzberg, 1975). These findings have had a significant impact on our thinking about managerial structures, training, and education over the past two decades.

While we now know more than we ever did about how managers in general go about their work, we do not know very much about how managerial functions vary at different levels of the organization. While distinctions are readily made between operators and middle managers (Wilson, 1989; Kanter, 1977), very little attention is given **to functional differentiation within** the managerial domain. At an intuitive level, we know that managers at the top are more heavily involved in establishing and maintaining the mission of the organization, ordering priorities, and engaging in strategic planning decisions than managers near the middle and bottom. Those at the top are more easily recognized, since they are generally hired, appointed or elected to a position of preeminent authority and responsibility within the organization. The closer one gets to the "top", the more managers resemble executives. But at the other end, the middle and bottom managers are not job descriptions that are easily recognizable. Most of us fall back on common sense notions, as did one of our twelve year old children, who, when asked what a middle manager was, responded by saying: "someone who works between the top and the bottom" of the organization. That is not a bad starting point, but it doesn't provide us with much of an understanding of what managers do toward the bottom of an organization.

Another way to answer the question might be to start by identifying what a middle management job is not. It is not generally regarded as an entry level job; one is not hired directly into a mid-management job out of college. Compensation comes into play somewhat, but it is certainly woefully inadequate in providing a clue as to who holds a mid-management job within an organization. Highly technical or professional positions such as senior level counsels in both the public and private sector can be much more highly paid than those who occupy mid-management jobs within an engineering department of a large public or private organization.

Span of control is also not necessarily an indicator of middle management responsibilities. A mid-management job can be a position occupied by only one person within an office. Consider the manager for labor relations in a medium size jurisdiction or private company. The person may have a large number of diverse duties but without many subordinates. On the other hand, the manager of a large paraprofessional staff of legal assistants in a private law office or a county District Attorney's Office may have a large span of control, but by comparison to the manager of labor relations have far less responsibilities. In short, we do not believe that the number of subordinates within a person's span of control is a very good indicator of middle-management roles.

While it may appear to be excessively ambiguous and glaringly trite, we conclude that middle managers are a **self identified** lot. They perform functions that are quite varied, not devoted solely to the completion of a specific and highly routine task and they have some years of experience within their career ladder. Beyond this, the most important characteristic of middle managers is their **self-conscious awareness that they exercise considerable discretion and that in the exercise of this discretion they are actively engaged in translating the policy goals and objectives of the organization into operational reality**. Regardless of its size, this function forms the core of any organization. In performing this function middle managers serve as essential communication links between the organization's chief executive officers and line personnel. To be successful, they must interpret and synthesize a variety of powerful influences on the work of the organization, including the demands of various internal and external leaders, the interests of consumers/clients, the perceptions of the general public, the needs of line personnel, the expectations of the organization's CEO's, and the goals of board members/elected officials. The middle managers' ability to self-define their role and to manage communication coming at them from all sides is essential to any organization's success.

What Are the Characteristic Tasks of Middle Managers?

The act of self defining one's work as mid-level occurs when a person first becomes aware that he or she must routinely go outside the core work group to meet the expectations of the job. "Trucking and trekking" outside the work group may be necessary to represent the core group's interests, to secure or lend assistance, to develop professional relationships through which others will be reliant or depend upon, to leverage other people's time (especially their superior's), or to maintain the core workgroup's visibility. A traditional police officer can spend an entire career working the streets without ever having done any significant managerial tasks. On the other hand, the same police officer working the streets in a community policing program may constantly be doing all of the things we consider mid-management work. Well, what kind of work is that?

1. Interpreting and representing their work unit's interests.

In most instances, mid-management work routinely requires meeting with others over the potential and actual distribution of resources. Any time budgets, grants, and other financial resources are at stake you will find representatives from various groups and organizations planning, organizing, debating, and thinking about the appropriate use and allocation of those resources. While their decisions may be far from final or authoritative, these kinds of meetings are at the core of the daily routine of a mid-manager.

The development of public policy responses to issues of the day is another major component of a mid-manager's work. Questions regarding the demographics of the organization, its strengths, its weakness, and its interests are often conveyed and delivered by a mid-manager to others not associated with the unit or organization.

Other examples which rely upon the manager's familiarity with the interests of the parent work unit are intra- and inter-organizational activities that affect the distribution of duties, responsibilities, or tasks. Specifically, community or neighborhood projects, task forces, any attempt at defining performance roles and standards, and bids to change or alter the manner in which tasks are performed and delivered are magnets which will quickly attract a multitude of middle managers. For example, the introduction and evolution of community policing within police departments requires countless organizational "get-togethers" involving community groups, police professionals, elected policy makers, and others with various kinds of expertise. The effort of these "get-togethers" is directed at moderating, changing, and influencing the manner in which historical police work is delivered. The sergeants and above who attend are classical middle managers. The same kind of deliberative interaction characterizes the introduction of customer/client service units within private, public, and nonprofit organizations.

2. Lending or securing assistance.

Another major task of middle managers is marketing and delivering the work group's expertise to another, different group's efforts. Prosecutors meeting with police officials and members from the FBI, INS, and local community groups to plan anti-drug strategies within an area involve people who have been entrusted by the prosecutor's office to represent and project the interests of the organization beyond its own walls. Much of what he or she is doing is finding areas in which the organization can be helpful and not be hurt.

Other examples might be a fire battalion captain's effort in working on an enhanced 911 system or a precinct captain's development of a policy that would allow business owners to directly prepare police reports legally regarding shoplifters. These are not only legal or technical issues, but they're middle management issues. The same is true in the private sector when, for example, the private utilities are called upon by the public sector to work out joint billing arrangements, electronic meter reading, coordinated conservation programs, special relief for the needy, etc.

3. Developing organizational relationships.

The middle manager develops and relies upon organizational relationships with others outside of the work unit in order to get things accomplished that are beyond the ability of the organization unit itself. A successful and seasoned middle manager, new to an organization, will quickly take steps to identify and associate with contemporaries in other allied organizations, knowing that familiarity and personal relationships go far in getting things done. Successful middle managers are also aware and take advantage of the ongoing nature of established relationships.

4. Leveraging other's time.

How often are mid-managers called upon to attend meetings and perform tasks where the purpose of the task or meeting is vague, ill-defined or even ill-conceived? In many instances it is at the behest of a superior in order to allow the superior to use his or her time on other matters. A mid-manager's task is not simply to physically be present and occupy space. There is an expectation that a middle manager can ably represent a collection of interests and be incisive enough to determine that the issues discussed have a bearing and a relationship to the abilities, concerns, and interests of their own organizational unit. Sometimes it is simply a "flag flying exercise" to maintain visibility and recognition that the organization or the unit has a sphere of interest and a stake in the topic under discussion.

We believe the above four functions are common to middle managers in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. All organizations need middle managers to represent the core group's interests, to secure or lend assistance, to develop professional relationships, and to leverage other people's time (especially their superior's). However, middle managers in the public sector carry out these functions quite differently than their counterparts in the private and, to a lesser extent, in the nonprofit sectors. These differences are the result of two primary differences. One is the lack of a common dollar denominator for measuring successful service in the public sector. The other difference results from the free market barriers to collaborative activity in the private sector. Because of these two differences, middle managers in the public sector have service and accountability responsibilities that are not faced by their counterparts in the private sector.

Part II - The Uniqueness of Middle Managers in the Public Sector: Interpreting What Good Service Means

What is good service?

Since government produces few measurable outputs and products, it ends up having to define what "good service" means both up and down in the organization and outwardly to clients and other interested parties. Those who are responsible for delivering the service at the counter or in the field need to be provided with performance standards. Given the absence of objective criteria, especially for the quality dimensions of the delivery of public services, middle managers are needed to negotiate the meaning of "acceptable performance", both in general terms as well as in particular cases where the person being served disputes either the amount or quality of service being provided.

As the question of performance moves upward in the organization, middle managers are needed to negotiate the tension between those at the bottom of the organization who are inclined to use particular standards to define successful performance (i.e., the ability to meet the needs of each individual served) and those above who are inclined to use more general formulaic standards (i.e., average clients service, the greatest cost/benefit ratio, the total number of tasks performed/clients served, etc.). In addition to the problems posed by the tendency to define "adequate service" somewhat differently at the bottom and top of public organizations, there is the additional problem of dealing with the ambiguity of what "adequate service" means externally to various clientele groups and interested parties. Both may tend to define "adequate service" differently than the individual client being served.

How Middle Managers Play a Decisive Role in Defining Good Service

One could argue that all of the service definition problems outlined above are equally present in both the public and private sectors. However, there are two major advantages the private sector possesses in addressing service problems. First, in a market economy dissatisfied customers frequently can find more readily accessible alternatives than consumers of a public service who may need to move to another jurisdiction to have their needs satisfied. Second, in the private sector it is easier to resolve disputes over service by falling back on a quantitative dollar standard. When these alternatives and standards are not available in the public sector, the burden on middle managers to negotiate and mediate conflicting views of service is considerably greater. There are three distinctive ways that middle managers participate in this critical task.

1. Reconciling Service Differences

One of the more difficult tasks of the middle manager, especially during an era of constrained resources, is to make the best use of the money available to meet the service expectations of various constituent groups. This has become an increasingly difficult task as demands have expanded for ever-shrinking general fund dollars. The following case example illustrates the kind of role we believe middle managers will be increasingly asked to play in the future.

The Parks Manager at the County is responsible for the County Park and another small Neighborhood Park. His span of control is rather small during the winter and grows during the peak summer season with temporary help. The County 2000 Plan mandates that the County will not be in the park expansion and development business. The Plan limits the County's future commitment to just two park sites. Pressures against this "hold-the-line" strategy include a large influx of population, a park advisory board, and a enthusiastic group of "fans" who actively maintain the pressure for park expansion and improvements.

What does the Parks Manager tell his rangers, his overworked seasonal workers, the parks advisory board? How does the Board policy affect day-to-day service to the park areas? Is County 2000 a vote of non-support for parks? If so, does the staff have license to give the citizens of the County what they pay for, i.e., lousy services?

Under the circumstance described above, we believe the Parks Manager is responsible for taking a policy like County 2000 and communicating to employees and other stakeholders that the County is not in the park expansion business. The Manager should be able to represent the reasons behind this position. Yet, at the same time, the Manager should not let this be an obstacle to providing quality services to the greatest number of people within available resources. The Parks Manager is required to be more creative in identifying alternative sources of revenue and ways of meeting the service expectations of his clientele. In the case described, the Manager collaborated on a timber thinning of County land and used these moneys to acquire federal matching funds. This was done without impacting general fund moneys!

Within the financial and political constraints outlined above, the Parks Manager must ensure that the hiring of seasonal staff every year satisfies the "spirit-and-intent" of the laws and policy directives found at the federal, state, and County level. Since the County is pursuing various ways to diversify its work force, the Parks Manager is expected to further these goals while still obtaining qualified people. To accomplish these goals the Manager must leverage other community group resources and address accessibility obstacles for the disabled community.

In short, the Manager is expected to run an effective and efficient operation using business practices that stand the test of public scrutiny. Yet, he is also expected to ensure that county residents enjoy the use of the Park, get treated with the utmost respect by County staff, and have a safe day. All of this must be accomplished within a set of severe budgetary constraints. Translating these multiple directives and constraints into some meaningful unit of service to the citizens - an enjoyable day at the park- is what a middle manager does!

This middle manager role gets replicated throughout public organizations on a daily basis. The transportation planners and engineering project managers take a jurisdiction's road prioritization policy, such as limiting the expenditures to only major arterial roads and emergency repairs, and convert this into a completed list of roads that get repaved each year. They do this with the goal of providing the biggest societal benefit to the intra and inter-jurisdictional transportation system. The project managers then ensure that each project gets completed with the appropriate qualitative and quantitative standards in order to protect and enhance the jurisdiction's road system investment. Without middle managers this complicated process of translating guidelines and constraints into acceptable service is not likely to get done.

2. Facilitating Inter-organizational Service Standards

Middle managers are the chief agents in facilitating interorganizational standards of service. For instance, a sheriff's deputy who believes that a child abuse multidisciplinary team is a useful enterprise has to market the idea to other organizations. In addition, the deputy has to take initiatory leadership in finding the necessary resources to accomplish the task. It will be middle managers who develop answers to such questions as who interprets the appropriate level of commitment, the length of time the commitment can last, how much an effort to expend, and who's role and responsibility it is to accomplish those tasks.

3. Reading the Community Culture

The concept of good service is dependent on the type and size of community, organization, and the role one plays within the organization. Thus, "good service" within the public sector is very much a cultural value. It is important for the public manager to be in touch with, and sympathetic to, the values and culture of the constituent community and the organization. One of the complaints often heard by public land use planning professionals is that, "Most of the planners live somewhere else and commute to this town to work!" "How can these bureaucrats understand or much less represent my interests or that of the community, if they do not live here?" The middle level manager must

tap deep into the community's culture and sometimes put aside standardized and prescribed ways of doing things.

For example, in many local jurisdictions the efficiency and effectiveness of transportation plans are being challenged by local residents who oppose projects on the simple ground that they conflict with "quality of life considerations". Middle managers play a key with local neighborhoods in negotiating how much transportation efficiency will be compromised to serve community values through the use of street closures, speed bumps, curb pushouts, and similar devices to slow or divert traffic. Local land use planners also frequently find themselves in a similar negotiating role with local residents. For example, the market forces in many wealthy local jurisdictions are resulting in housing densities considerably lower than what is required under state mandated land use goals and the professional norms of planners who have been schooled in certain notions of "adequate housing choices" for those with moderate incomes. Faced with this conflict between community standards and those of the state and profession, the middle manager is required to craft a course of action that develops consensus and produces legally acceptable solutions through neighborhood planning processes. In short, the standard of "good service" must be informed and guided by the deeply held beliefs of residents within the community.

community.

Part III - The Uniqueness of Middle Managers in the Public Sector: Insuring Accountability

What is accountability?

One of the chief differences between middle managers in the public and private sectors is the role the former play in dealing with the following kind of accountability problems.

- The need to be responsive, especially since public managers deal with citizens who may not be able to find alternative service providers when they are dissatisfied. In contrast to customers and clients, citizens undertake their transactions with government agencies with a quite different set of expectations regarding responsiveness.
- The need to act in a legally correct fashion, even when doing so does not serve the perceived interests of the citizens.
- The need to respect minority interests.
- The need to protect the overall appearance of "fairness", "propriety", etc. of the governance process,
- The need to engage in cooperative dialogue with significant participants in the governance process, including other political jurisdictions, private sector groups, and other organizational units that may be affected by a planned course of action.

How Middle Managers Promote Accountability

1. Making Sense Out of Multiple Sources of Authority

Middle managers play a critical role in ensuring a constancy of purpose in public organizations in the midst of multiple sources of authority. Unlike private and most nonprofit organizations, public organizations have multiple sources of authority that need to be reconciled and translated into a plan of action. Starting with annual budgets, each organizational work unit is explicitly, or at least implicitly, committed to certain service levels. In addition, there are a variety of state and federal laws, multitudinous Board governing policies, and department-level guidelines that must be complied with. In the most negative case, there may be only vague philosophical direction. What does all of this jumble mean to the employees "on the street" or the "front line"? What does this ambiguous and general direction mean to the juvenile counselor, the deputy sheriff, the transportation engineer, the people responsible for the delivery of each service?

The middle managers play a key role in answering these questions. They are the "keepers of the questions of accountability", as they use their knowledge of the more general guidelines, direction, and parameters of the organization to reconcile tensions between service levels and service quality. In short, they perform the interpretative role necessary to operationalize policies, laws, etc. into tangible services to the citizenry.

2. Acquiring the Legitimate Authority to Act

Public organizations have to conduct their entire business function in the public setting where all of the decisions they make and almost every document they produce can be scrutinized and second guessed by any citizen within the jurisdiction. Public organizations must also recognize the local political pressures as well. They must satisfy Board policies, detailed strategic plans, purchasing rules, civil service guidelines, public hearings and organized citizens groups who may have conflicting or unformed opinions.

The success of an organization in balancing these multiple sources of authority is critical to acquiring the legitimacy to take any given action. Frequently, it is the middle manager who bears this primary responsibility for weaving together these multiple threads of authority into a fabric of public legitimacy. Take, for example, the steps necessary to complete a local road improvement project. The middle manager must try to reconcile the interests of local residents in noise control, safety, access, and landscaping with the needs of the community at large in building effective and cost efficient road projects. These middle managers do not have stockholders, profit sharing schemes, the profit/loss statement or competition to tell them exactly how they are doing.

3. Accountability Issues in the Management of Interorganizational Boundaries

Middle managers in the public sector spend considerable time and energy crafting and implementing solutions to problems that cut across organizational boundaries within their own jurisdictions. An example of this complex process of defining interorganizational accountability is found in one of our local county's quest to preserve affordable housing in a high growth housing market.

As the county continued to expand its major arterial street system, it aggressively acquired privately held parcels needed for widening and realignment projects. During and after construction the county was left with parcels of land and houses that needed to be moved or demolished. Traditionally, these surplus properties had been offered to the highest bidder in a public auction. This process insured the taxpaying public the highest rate of return and provided the street fund with the greatest amount of revenue.

Faced with a growing demand for low cost housing, the new housing director approached other county managers to generate some organization-wide support in helping the jurisdiction solve its problem. The transportation director arrived at an obvious conclusion: move surplus houses to surplus land and turn the units over to the Housing Authority. However, this simple solution was difficult to implement. The transportation staff was known throughout the jurisdiction for its commitment to excellence, for its desire to preserve the integrity of transportation programs, and for its ability to stretch scarce transportation dollars to meet the county's growth needs. To succeed the director was required to broaden the source of staff accountability away from departmental loyalties to encompass a larger accountability for the overall socioeconomic well-being of the community. After several months of discussion this was accomplished.

The managers in this case clearly operated within the confines of "middle management". They had the technical knowledge to develop the program, the credibility and proximity to the line personnel to share a broadening of perspective beyond their provincial loyalties, the time to work out the details, and the proximity to executive decision makers to sell the program.

4. Accountability Issues in the Management of Interjurisdictional Boundaries

The middle level manager of public organizations in most loosely coupled metropolitan regions is engaged in an almost continuous dialogue with other governmental entities. The objective of this dialogue is to make our system of fragmented governance work more efficiently and effectively. Within a typical metropolitan region, cooperation and information sharing is essential to the success of local governments and their elected officials. Common examples include: regional transportation, metropolitan area land use planning, open space acquisition, law enforcement, sewer and water service coordination, taxation issues, etc. This level of cooperation and information sharing is not present within the private sector where competition for profit is the dominant paradigm. While some jurisdictions still function to a certain extent on the competitive model, scarce public resources is inspiring new levels of cooperation. When this occurs, middle managers are the ones who translate general cooperative agreements into workable plans of action that meet the test of public accountability. The following case example illustrates our point.

In one of our local jurisdictions, the board of commissioners also serves as the governing board of a special sewer district. The special district is treated under state law as an entirely separate local government. A recent performance audit of the sewer district's operations recommended that its fleet maintenance activities could be better performed by consolidating them into the county's operation. This recommendation presented a dilemma for both jurisdictional entities. First, serious customer service problems could arise if the consolidation occurred with the grudging reluctance of the staff. Second, the audit indicated that the savings from the consolidation would exclusively accrue to the special district. In short, the county staff had little to gain and, possibly, much to lose as a result of the consolidation. Without staff support on both sides, the consolidation was not likely to occur.

A critical role was played by the middle managers in both organizations in laying the ground work for a successful consolidation. They redefined the issues governing consolidation away from narrow organizational efficiency and effectiveness questions to issues of accountability. The managers successfully argued with their respective staff members that while they were accountable to their fleet operation and needed to protect these operations from being undermined by customer service problems, they had a greater accountability to the public taxpayers as a whole.

5. Balancing the Tradeoff between Equity and Efficiency Considerations

In the public sector middle level managers play a critical role in the great tradeoff between efficiency and equity (Okun, 1975). By tradeoff we simply mean striking a balance between, on the one hand, following procedural rules in the interest of promoting equitable treatment of agency members or clients and, on the other, making an exception to the rules in order to promote greater efficiency and effectiveness. Because of the difficulty of judging efficiency, in most public organizations equity is more important than efficiency. As James Q. Wilson points out, "[w]e cannot easily say whether the pupils were educated, the streets made safer, or some diseases prevented: but we can say whether every pupil got the same textbook, every citizen got the same police response, and every patient got the same vaccine (Wilson, 132)." As a consequence of this bias toward equity and rule-following, the burden of providing legitimating authority for making exceptions falls on the middle managers, as the following case examples illustrate.

What should a local planner do when faced with a request by a low income family to allow a camper trailer to be located on a property where their house has burned until a new structure is built? Or what does a code enforcement officer do when she discovers 156 persons occupying disabled recreational vehicles, old buses, campers etc. in mobile home parks? In both cases the decision strictly to enforce the letter of the law and enlarge the homeless population or to allow continued occupancy by seeking amendments to the city code is primarily the role of the middle manager. The middle manager must take the initiatory leadership to persuade the jurisdiction to

set aside the efficiency of code enforcement for the sake of achieving equity.

Part IV - Internal Support Services and Contracting Out: Putting the Role of Middle Managers to the Test

One way of putting the function of middle managers in public agencies to the test is to examine their role under financial and efficiency pressures to consolidate services and to contract out to the private sector. "Consolidation" and "contracting out" have both become increasingly fashionable public sector strategies to operate government more like a business. To further explore the peculiar role of middle managers in the public sector, we will use a case example of a local county's experience with these consolidation and contracting out strategies over the past fifteen years.

In the late seventies Washington County entered the world of privatization by requiring its in-house mental health programs to compete with the private sector. After evaluating the models for mental health service delivery in the community, the staff concluded that private sector non-profit organizations had inherent advantages over a county-provided service delivery model. The non-profits had lower pay scales, less mandated employee benefits, less unionization pressures and, because they did not have the added accountability pressures of local general purpose governments, they could make more rapid business decisions than the County. In other words, non-profit organizations were much more efficient and were able to adjust more quickly to an ever-changing environment. As a result, the County moved into the privatization arena as early as the late 70's. This model was re-evaluated in the mid 80's and the County again decided to continue the current outsourcing model with two important caveats, both of which had to do with retaining greater accountability over its mental health services.

The first caveat was that the County would directly perform all planning responsibilities. Second, the County would continue to perform all activities requiring interorganizational and interjurisdictional negotiations. The County held on to these two functions because its decision makers recognized that problems and solutions in the delivery of mental services within the community were very complex and cross various socioeconomic, demographic and organizational lines. Furthermore, solutions required the cooperation and coalitions of various stakeholders in both the government and the nonprofit community. In short, identifying problems and crafting solutions to the delivery of mental health services required initiatory leadership that was not financially tied (by appearance or in fact) to a particular strategy or County contract; that was able to understand and empathize with the County's values, philosophy and mission; and, that could easily develop coalitions among County organizational stakeholders.

In the early eighties, Washington County embarked on another bold privatization move. It decided to completely privatize the data processing function for the organization. However, in contrast to its earlier decision to retain many of the middle management functions in contracting out mental health services, the County arranged for the data processing contractee to perform all of these functions.

Like many jurisdictions during this early period of making the transition to the world of computers, there was great enthusiasm for the increased efficiencies and levels of sophisticated analysis that centralized data processing could achieve, especially for financial management. In addition, the County's financial management information system was not meeting external auditing standards. Faced with the promises of a "new world order" and the threat of a negative review by auditors, the County decided to contract with a firm to provide the full range of services typically found in a data processing department for a County, including long range planning, middle management, facilities management, and the installation of a new financial management information system.

The result of this decision was regarded by everyone at the time as remarkable. The County received a well thought out long range strategic plan for

automation, a new financial system, and a stabilized data processing center. However, the enthusiasm associated with new beginnings began to wane as the computer industry underwent a PC revolution and employees became well versed in the application of automation tools to perform their jobs. As a consequence of these developments, the issue of data processing (or more appropriately called information systems) became much more problematic within the organization.

The "typical" employee in the 1990's has a PC at his/her desk that has more computing capacity than a 5' by 20' main frame computer had ten years. Employees now can create and/or program customized tools to meet their personal needs. They have or may wish access to information kept on other systems in the County that may make their job easier. For example, a detective or planner in the Sheriff's Office may want to map out crime patterns in an area of the County in order to identify trends or develop prevention/apprehension strategies. To accomplish this, Sheriff's office planners may wish to tailor the County's Geographic Information System (GIS), originally developed for land use planners, to its own data management needs.

Increasing employee dissatisfaction with the inflexibility of the County's contracted-model of meeting their information and data management needs resulted in the reassessment of the model by an outside consultant who was not burdened by the County's history, special interests, or other biases. After numerous surveys and discussions with stakeholders, the consultant concluded that users did not feel they could play a big part in making their county operations more effective and efficient. While they saw numerous opportunities for improvement, both individual employees and department heads felt stymied by the inability of the centralized information systems staff to develop technical and managerial work teams that could create solutions that crossed organizational lines. In fact, in certain cases the operating departments circumvented the centralized information systems staff and created their own work teams and solutions.

In response to these concerns, the consultant recommended an immediate change in the service delivery model. He recommend that the County reassume control over the middle manager's tasks of planning, coordination, and facilitating the improvement and delivery of information service and data management. The restoration of these functions was viewed as central to increasing the confidence of employees and departments in information planning recommendations (conflict of interest); facilitating cross functional teams to identify and implement automation solutions; and, improving the County's ability to manage and receive an adequate level of control and accountability of day-to-day services.

Washington County's experience in contracting out its mental health and management information services teaches two important lessons about the role of middle managers in the public sector. First, in the public sector where definitions of "adequate service" have multiple and conflicting meanings, middle managers play a central role in converting ambiguous and nebulous policies, goals, laws, business plans, and general management practices into some useful output. It constantly requires balancing the interests of individual employees, subordinate work groups, citizens, policy makers, management, and the public tapestry of rules and laws. In most public organizations the internal support functions, like personnel, finance, purchasing, risk management, and fleet operations, are placed in the position of performing this balancing and interpretive role for the organization as a whole. As such, they become an important surrogate for testing the extent to which a wide range of services provided to external clients might be contracted out and whether in doing so the middle management functions can and should be contracted out as well.

The second lesson to be learned from Washington County's experience in flattening the organization by contracting out public services is that the role of middle managers changes over time and probably varies from one kind of service to another. For example, Washington County experienced a different kind of need for middle managers to implement its information system in the late sixties than it experienced in the early nineties. In addition, we suspect that it is also true that the need for middle managers to implement and oversee mental health policies may be quite different than is the case for the implementation of land use and transportation policies.

SUMMARY CONCLUSIONS

In summary, we have argued that middle managers in public agencies play a decisive role in determining their organization's success. They take the general vision, mission, and policies of their organization and transform them into a tangible reality. They convert philosophies and dreams into units of service. They determine the quality of services and the service levels as well. They ensure that the public agency's day-to-day business decisions and practices are beyond reproach and are accountable to the citizenry. In short, they make service meaningful and they make it accountable.

In the rush to recreate government in the image of the private sector, we need to stop and ask several central questions surrounding the critical role performed by middle managers in the public sector. First, before deciding whether and how much to flatten public organizations and reduce layers of middle management, public agencies need to consider what kind of balance they wish to strike among the claims of efficiency, the claims of accountability and the claims of equity/fairness. Middle managers play a crucial role in balancing the need for efficiency against two opposing organizational impulses. The first is the department's desire to pursue its core mission (i.e., building roads, stopping crime, counseling juveniles, etc.) in the most efficient and effective manner possible. The second is the employees' desire to be "fairly" treated by supervisors and peers, to be given adequate tools and discretion, to be challenged, and to be adequately compensated. In the rush to reinvent government by flattening organizational hierarchies, contracting out services, and entering into partnerships with the private and nonprofit sectors, it is important to stop and ask how much accountability the public sector wishes to impose and how much control it wishes to retain over what counts for acceptable service.

The problem of multiple and conflicting purposes faced by public agencies raises a second set of questions surrounding the role of middle managers that deserve further attention. What kind of organizational structure is needed to achieve salutary public ends? Many recommendations to reinvent government assume that the best antidote to counter the bureaucratic phenomena (i.e., multiple organizational layers, too many inflexible rules, conflicting and inefficient protocols, and lack of incentives and discretion at the operating level of the organization) is to empower work unit employees, create entrepreneurial enclaves, and decentralize organizational control. Many of these recommendations resemble Mintzberg's model of the "diversified organization". Yet, Mintzberg concludes that:

appearances and even trends notwithstanding, the diversified configuration is generally not suited to the public and not-for-profit sectors of society. Governments and other public-type institutions that wish to divisionalize to avoid centralized machine bureaucracy may often find the imposition of performance standards an artificial exercise. They may be better off trying to exercise control of their units in a different way. For example, they can select unit managers who reflect their desired values, or indoctrinate them in those values, and then let them manage freely, the control in effect being normative rather than quantitative (and their structure therefore a hybrid between the diversified and the missionary configuration (Mintzberg, 1989, p. 172).

Mintzberg's observations remind us of a third set of middle-management questions that deserve further investigation. In addition to the role middle managers play in interpreting and reconciling public goals and effectuating organizational structure, they may be critical agents in facilitating the formation and transformation of organizational cultures. Through a combination of fiscal constraints and pressures from stakeholders, many public sector agencies are undergoing major shifts in their organizational mission. Whether it is environmental organizations trying to make sense out their mandate to "manage for multiple use" or health and human service organizations seeking to redefine parental and societal responsibility for the care

and nurturing of our children, we need to know more about the role of middle managers in creating and maintaining the values of our public agencies before we blithely assume their dispensability. This is especially the case in most smaller jurisdictions throughout the United States, where the same individuals perform a variety of intermingled functions within many of our local public agencies.

Over the past decade we have witnessed a growing recognition of the important role that our career public servants in general play in preserving the health of our democratic polity. However, most of this attention has focused on the discretionary role of senior level administrators (Rohr, 1986; Rohr, 1989; Kass and Catron, 1990; Morgan and Kass, 1993; Terry, Sage, 1995). Current efforts to reinvent government should serve as a wake-up call to pay more attention to the role of those occupying the middle positions in our public agencies (for an excellent example, see Havassy, 1990). Our experience suggests that the future health of our democratic polity depends on us taking these roles much more seriously than we have in the past.

ENDNOTES

¹ Some comments on methodology are in order. This paper began as a focus group study undertaken by Douglas Morgan, Director and Professor of Public Administration at Lewis and Clark College. It is part of a larger focus group study of the changing role and function of career administrators in the public sector (see Morgan & Kass, 1993, especially p. 187). However, unlike previous focus groups conducted by the author, the middle manager topic under exploration touched an especially visceral cord among participating members of the focus group and they increasingly became active agents of authorship by offering numerous considerations and case examples.

Because this study departs from traditional focus group techniques, it raises some difficult methodological problems, the most important of which is the line between empirical evidence and generational theory (Frederickson, 1994, pp. 36-38). How much of our findings are a result of the theory we share at the outset, and how much of our theoretical speculations in the conclusion of our paper are genuinely informed and guided by the empirical evidence surfaced in the focus group meetings? While focus group research is subject to this criticism more than other methodological approaches, we recognize that our study is especially vulnerable to this criticism. We have sought to temper the urge "to find what you are looking for" by adhering to the following processes: 1) Confine the observations of the participants to personal experience that can be documented; 2) Cross-check the immediate experience of the participants against other jurisdictional, organizational, and geographic experiences found within the focus group; 3) Cross-check the experience of the participants against current research and writing on the topic of concern.

A final concern raised by our approach is that it draws conclusions primarily from the perspective of those who currently supervise middle managers. While the focus group participants viewed themselves as still performing middle management functions, their conclusions may not, in fact, accurately capture what many middle managers do on a daily basis in most public organizations. Our study emphasizes the importance of capturing this kind of information before undertaking extensive reorganization of the middle management layers of public organizations. We need to know who and where the middle management functions identified in our study will be performed when public organizations are "flattened", reorganized, contracted out, and undergo other changes that are variations on the reinvention theme.

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