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***The public sector: Managing the unmanageable***

Alexander Stevenson (London: Kogan Page; 2013; ISBN: 978-0-749467-77-7; 216 pp; £19.99)

The public sector often carries an image of rudimentary tasks, vague philosophies and complex practices which frequently portray government management in the civil service under a less than favourable light. It is these and many other negative connotations that may undermine the ability of governments to efficiently serve their citizens, thus becoming the source for countless complaints and less than satisfactory policies. So what is at the core of seemingly ineffective public sector management procedures and how can the public sector better serve the public?

Author Alexander Stevenson establishes numerous challenges faced by public sector managers as a result of two important factors – the absence of a straightforward success measure and the need for democratic accountability. Throughout the book it is stressed that without the ability to properly assess an organisation's performance, it becomes difficult to genuinely motivate people within the civil service, and without this motivation it becomes difficult to ensure public accountability.

The book is structured as a cause, effect and solution text. To better understand the lack of accountability, Stevenson introduces various reasons why this is difficult to achieve in the public sector. Firstly, political accountability outweighs managerial accountability as the public hold politicians solely responsible for the success or failure of enacted policies. However, though difficult as it may be to tell apart, there is a distinction between the 'failures of delivery and the failures of policy' (p. 19). Secondly, the correlation between the quality of an individual's performance and the results attained is not easily discernable. Thirdly, defining what needs to be done and how it is done is another contributing factor to the lack of public accountability. These are the recurring themes of the book.

Public sector managers encounter many different challenges when attempting to create an organisational structure that encourages civil servants to achieve their goals and provide outstanding service when meeting the demands of the public. However, the author proposes

useful strategies to circumvent these obstacles. Motivation in the public sector is a key element towards creating accountability. One method proposed to accomplish this is by drawing performance comparisons directly with peers. Comparisons can serve to encourage civil servants to improve their work and could also provide helpful insight into the tactics of their successful organisations.

To further increase motivation, public sector managers must strive to 'get people as close as possible to the impact they are having' (p. 27). Doing so can enhance accountability as this reminds civil servants of the benefits their work provides to others. The author also suggests establishing a strong yet realistic narrative for the organisation. This allows each individual within the public sector to recognise 'how their work supports the overall objectives of the organisation' (p. 33).

The ability to delegate when necessary is essential. The author provides examples of two of the most prominent mayors of New York City and their distinct yet equally successful approaches to devolving. Mayor Rudy Giuliani was known for a 'command-and-control style of management' and believed in being kept accountable, thus his management was perceived as effective in enhancing accountability by 'helping people understand clearly what they were responsible for and helping the manager keep on top of what was going on' (pp. 33–4). Mayor Michael Bloomberg, however, believed in a 'more devolved approach to managing' and, as such, his management techniques in devolving responsibility could 'deliver effective accountability as people would put more effort, pride and imagination into something they felt they owned' (p. 34). Among other strategies, performance-related pay and setting targets could also be potentially beneficial to creating accountability, though it is inferred that caution should be exercised as these methods have not definitively shown positive outcomes and, as a result, have received both positive and negative criticisms.

At this point in the book, Stevenson shifts his focus to the relationships between politicians and public sector managers in what he humorously labels as the 'challenges of arranged marriages' (p. 65). This type of relationship relies heavily on a cooperative structure in order to achieve each other's goals. However, as the author describes, politicians and public sector managers have differing skills and experiences, which could create tension when attempting to develop an efficient power balance. 'Marriage guidance counselling' is subsequently offered as a solution to this potential tension. Managers

who take the time to understand their political priorities and respectfully engage politicians and the political process could help ease the pressures of this partnership. Additionally, having a clear outline of the objectives to be accomplished helps ensure their delivery.

With any position of authority comes the duty to provide helpful guidelines or suggestions when assessing the work ethic of civil servants. The author acknowledges that this type of responsibility is not one that many in the public sector enjoy as it can be difficult to develop an effective yet fair standard for evaluating performance and to navigate through confrontation when underperformance is detected. However, issues of poor performance must be addressed, regardless of how awkward or time-consuming they may be.

When giving feedback, it is argued by Stevenson that 'if done well, it should support and improve the performance of individuals but can also be a lever to drive the performance of an entire team or organisation' (p. 80). One of the advantages of pointing out work-related deficiencies could be to improve the performance of other civil servants. Furthermore, it could also produce long-term benefits as confronting the issue early on enables managers to spend a considerably less amount of time correcting mistakes. Nonetheless, the necessary tools for delivering effective appraisals lie in the evidence gathered in support of any performance claims and the ability to establish a connection between the appraisal and the organisation's objectives.

Another responsibility public sector managers seldom enjoy is attempting to project and maintain a positive appearance in the media. The media is notorious for casting the public sector as an unscrupulous administration but rarely does it shine a light on the sector's progressive accomplishments. It is for this reason that Stevenson notes that public sector managers should carefully evaluate proposals as they are 'taking responsibility for services which can dramatically affect people's lives' (p. 110).

Being responsible for services rendered to the public involves taking into account all the risks associated with any proposed services or changes. Considering all positive and negative factors, innovation is rarely thought of as an advantage within the public sector. This is due to the fact that the 'penalties for failure are too large and the rewards for success too small' (p. 111). Hence, risk and innovation, as the author states, could be managed effectively if public sector managers

assess the probabilities and the potential impacts of the risks, and develop an efficient procedure to resolve any complications should they arise. More importantly, trusting the ability of other organisations to do their job properly will 'ensure integrity of process and an effective response' (p. 115).

Throughout the book the author provides extensive examples to help establish and differentiate the challenges public sector managers regularly come across from their private sector counterparts. Thus, towards the end of the text, Stevenson dedicates a section to what managers in the private sector could learn from those in the public sector. The most notable differences in management techniques lie in the ability of public sector managers to work closely with other organisations to compare data and resources in order to reach their goals. 'Public sector managers spend a considerable amount of time trying to create and sustain partnerships with other organisations... this is because so many public sector issues require a coordinated approach' (p. 154). Working with other organisations is crucial to the development and success of the public sector. Unlike the private sector, a competitive factor is removed as each organisation shares a common goal: to serve the public.

The appeal of this book is derived from the countless references to experts in the public sector who daily encounter adversity and public scrutiny for the benefit of the collective good. It is a practical approach to effective management and provides guidance to novice administrators and those who are looking to improve existing techniques in order to create the most productive team or organisation possible. Through observation and insightful interviews the text outlines the faults in the public sector and suggests methods to address discrepancies found in the civil service.

The author acknowledges that there is no foolproof method to management in the public sector and that different strategies produce different results for different people. However, if the resources readily available in all areas of civil service are used in conjunction with management techniques that can genuinely motivate civil servants to make an impact with the public, it could begin to change the negative image commonly associated with the public sector.

In closing, Stevenson emphasises four pieces of advice: to make use of the abundant comparable data produced by other organisations, the importance of tying civil servants with the impact of their work, seeking performance feedback and applying it towards improving the

organisation, and the importance of maintaining a proactive work ethic. 'In the face of complex governance, onerous bureaucracy and understandable risk aversion, proactive managers will always be focused on how they can achieve useful things through their energy, imagination and intuition' (p. 180).

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