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The Role of the Public Administrator

by

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There are various roles that are played by the Public Administrator. It must be important that the role of the administrator is not to be confused with his or her job, although, the role of the administrator may be defined by his or her job. For example, an administrator may have a job where he or she compiles data gathered from subordinates and analyzes the data to develop effective solutions to a problem in the form of policies. This may be his or her job, and the job may be titled Assistant Administrative Analyst, but this may not necessarily be his or her role. Given the description of duties, one may infer that the role of this administrator may be that of a Problem Solver. This study distinguishes between various roles of the Public Administrator.

In a study of democracy and Public Administration, John P. Burke (1989) focused on the tension between democracy and bureaucracy. It is here that the role of the Administrator is defined as a guide that is responsible for taking the efficient bureaucratic organization through the moral aspects of a responsive democracy. Burke does not go into detail on how the administrator guides the organization but his next depiction shows how the organization may have an affect on the role of the administrator. Burke addresses the dilemmas faced by officials on a daily basis. Officials have their morals tested and are expected to follow organizational protocols impartial to what their personal beliefs may entail. Burke gives administrators the role of actors because they have their personal beliefs and agendas in their private lives, but once they come into the work place, they are expected to act accordingly to the demands of an efficient and effective organization. Some may feel sorry for administrators but as Burke points out, "Administrators, in choosing careers in public service, are often well aware of the moral pitfalls" (181, 1989). They are analogous to the stunt persons who are aware of the dangers the stunt may do to their bodies in an attempt to perform a spectacular act for the enjoyment of the moviegoers (clients/citizens) in exchange for the appropriate pay. They have come under

contract and have agreed to perform such duties even at the possibilities of such risks.

In another study conducted by Pamela B. Teaster (2003), the term Guardian was used to describe the role of the Public Administrator. This study focuses on care given to the indigent, the senior citizens, the people with diseases, and the children who are neglected and have insufficient care. The term "Parens Patriae" is used and is defined as "the duty of the sovereign to care for its citizens who cannot care for themselves" (397, 2003). This has vast implications in that it means that the role of Public Administrators come with the responsibility of providing medicine, shelter, clothing, and food to those in need. Being that there may be an enormous population of people who need these services, developing methods for effectively and efficiently distributing these services may become intricately burdensome. After all, how is one to define and measure the criteria for who should get what services, when, where, how much, and for how long? In addition, because resources may be scarcely limited and not everyone may be able to receive services, where should the lines of priority be drawn? It may fall into the jurisdiction of the Public Administrator to make such decision, which is another problem in its own: discretion. This discretion is the administrator's ability to make decisions when it may not be clearly

defined or described in their agencies contract or manual or when there may be multiple options on various steps that may be taken concerning a certain situation.

Teaster (2003), when describing the responsibility given to administrators concerning wards of the state, labels administrators as Surrogate Decision Makers. Some of these decisions, according to Teaster, “included medication and other medical decisions, habilitation decisions, financial decisions, and care and quality-of-life decisions” (399, 2003). These decisions are not necessarily made according to a schedule or some seasonal activity but may spontaneously arise in the event of new wards entering into the system, wards becoming ill, or other factors that may submerge. The administrators must be aware of what procedures they may take, where available resources are located, and have the proper funding and planning available in the event of contingencies. If the administrators are not prepared in the event of catastrophes, the affected parties may file litigation against the agencies responsible for rendering these services.

Another author focuses on the actor role of Public Administrators the Theatre Metaphor used by many to portray officials and administrators in different lights. Larry D. Terry (1997) has discussed how in the Reagan era,

administrators were portrayed as villains and in defense of that categorization, supporters of Public Administrators attempted to cast the role of hero on these officials. Sometimes it is not necessarily the administrator that attempts to assume these roles, but most of the time they are type cast for these roles. For example, when a person attempts to get a straight answer from a bureaucratic organization and is transferred from one administrator to another with out completely having his or her concern addressed, the administrators may have the role of villain attributed to them. When the disaster resulting from Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, Louisiana, and FEMA was slow to respond to the needs of the people, their administrators also received the role of playing the villain. On the other hand, when administrators develop effective programs that address the concerns of a specific population, the role of Hero is attributed to them. Even though the overall role may be that of an actor, the individual roles are given favorable or detestable attention depending on the outcomes resulting from the actions or inaction of various administrators. Terry points out that both of these roles may be problematic because when administrators are depicted as villains, government is given less credibility and is seen as “an evil force that must be conquered and destroyed” (58). In addition, the depiction of the administrator as a hero may

be problematic because this gives the officials an unrealistic level of expectations to which that may not be able to meet. Some problems may be wicked and unsolvable, and deeming administrators as heroes may be setting them up for failure.

For the purpose of this discussion, one final role will be included. Not that there are not more than the roles listed here, but it would serve to keep the attention of the viewer focused on the issue at hand by listing more than one role so that he or she may know that there are various roles taken on by Public Administrators. The final role discussed here was described with due recognition by Charles T. Goodsell (1992); Goodsell described the role of the Public Administrator as that of an Artisan. In his own words, Goodsell states,

“It is, rather, to argue that the carrying out of common professional duties by public administrators can, with considerable payoff for both administrator and citizen, be viewed as the execution of an applied or practical art... it embodies a specialized skill that is capable of creating results that are both usable and pleasing to behold. Specific objects are created and tasks performed, yet in ways and with consequences that establish in the minds of both creator and audience a sense of

intrinsic satisfaction, above and beyond the utilitarian purpose at hand.” (247).

The specialized skill here may be analyzing data, evaluating data, conducting research using various methods of polling and surveying constituents. These tasks performed may bring about plans, policies, and legislation which may be the objects referred to by Goodsell. When these “objects” bring about social services that provide shelter to the homeless, food stamps to those in hunger, clothing to those without, and even jobs for the disenfranchised, the intrinsic satisfactions becomes salient. Using the term science alone to describe what administrators do seems to take away the human creativity that is put into the tasks performed by administrators. The depiction of the administrators as artisans denotes that the work done by them is a work of beauty in its most precious form.

There may be hundreds of roles fulfilled by Public Administrators. This discussion has presented a few of the roles that are most often seen among people who come into contact with various agencies and their officials. These roles include guides that lead the organization on a path that serves the people, actors who are to put personal issues aside for the sake of performance, guardians who care for and act on behalf of the helpless, surrogate decision makers who utilize discretion concerning issues that

affect the lives of the disenfranchised, villains when things go wrong, heroes when things go right, and artisans who utilize artistic talents and craft objects that bring forth satisfaction. These roles give the field of Public Policy and Administration romanticized features that most would not recognize when thinking about bureaucracy. Administrators can be seen as daring, compassionate individuals who take on the difficult task of being the problem solvers in society. Some may see it as a dirty job, but someone has to do it.