



# Public administration

## From bureaucratic culture to citizen-oriented culture

Public  
administration

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**Abstract** *This paper analyzes how public administration may improve the service it offers to citizens through a suitable organizational culture; for this purpose, it starts by studying the specific features of the culture of public administration. In this respect, it analyzes the existing taxonomies in public administration, the role of culture in these agencies and how a diagnosis of such culture is made. Then, it describes the problems of bureaucratic culture, typical of many public agencies, and briefly describes the features of a public service, citizen-oriented culture. Finally, it proposes a specific methodology for the modification of a bureaucratic culture into a culture based on the notion of serving the citizen, together with an analysis of when modification is necessary.*

### Characteristics of organizational culture and its feasibility in public administration

The first issue that we must clarify is that public administration of each country has a number of specific features as regards “the way things are done”, which differs from one country to another. Also, within each administration there are plenty of agencies with their own peculiar characteristics: local, provincial or regional, national and even transnational agencies. Furthermore, should this not be enough, within these agencies independent bodies operate; for example, within a local administration there exists a police department, a fire brigade, council rates collection, sports, town planning departments, etc. with their own idiosyncrasies.

All these subdivisions make it a complex task to study the characteristics, role and changes in organizational culture in public administration from a general point of view. The results of these analyses in private, or even in state-owned corporations, are only partly applicable concerning methodology and the study of shared values.

Moreover, Sinclair (1989) admits that, due to the separation between the management (public officials) and control (politicians and those making public decisions), public organizations are very sensitive to the changes in political influence, for both the objectives and the measurement of efficiency are unstable and short-term. Similarly, Rainey *et al.* (1976) came to the conclusion that public organizations have less autonomy and flexibility at decision making than private corporations.

Despite all these peculiarities, it is possible to analyse how to improve working habits and the results of different public administrations by approaching the culture of these bodies. In this line of thought, we agree with Maynard-Moody *et al.* (1986) and Newman (1994), in that the reorganization of a department or section of a public agency is not merely a technical issue of organizational design, with the best qualified people; it is also a matter of social interventions, which change depending on the assumptions that are shared.

Therefore, if we define corporate culture as a set of values, symbols and rituals shared by the members of a certain firm, describing the way things are done within an organization when solving internal managerial problems, together with those related to customers, suppliers and environment, we may point out a few general contributions it may make to improve the management of a public body.

From a broad point of view, there are a number of activities in which the influence of organizational culture is more noticeable, the most important being the completion of projects with the intervention of more than one public body, or those in which a combination of public and private efforts is required. Despite these important contributions, the most relevant one is that it may improve the level of satisfaction in services received by the citizens (provided that they agree with this culture); such is the central issue of our paper. Concerning the specific contributions it may make, we may list the following:

- It allows us to know beforehand if the introduction of new technologies will be accepted satisfactorily. For example, the problems of the impact of the use of computers upon the organizational culture of public administration has been studied by Barrett (1992) and Frissen (1989).
- It lays down the guidelines for the usage of information.
- It ensures cohesion amongst the members of the public body.
- It reduces the risk in projects where a specific public body intervenes alongside with other public or private organizations.
- If it is a suitable one, it may allow an increase in satisfaction in services received by the citizens.

Once we have seen the contributions that organizational culture may make, we shall now propose a basic methodology for its diagnosis.

### **Methodology for cultural diagnosis in public administrations**

#### *Physical observation of public administrations*

The first step is a physical analysis of the public body, for it is possible to detect at first sight the material symbols (and a few immaterial ones). Besides, in an informal manner, it is possible to start taking note of issues that, despite their simple appearance, are relevant to our purpose, such as the way people are received, the accessibility to different sections of the organization, and the predisposition towards later co-operation if needed.

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### *Auditing the printed material*

When analysing the documents for a cultural diagnosis, it is not necessary to scan long numerical lists and series; rather, since ours is basically a qualitative study, the generic structure is what really matters. Therefore, quantitative analyses hardly apply to these audits. Thus, Hummel (1994) believes that one of the great obstacles for the management of values in public administration is that culture is about “meanings” and not “figures”.

In this way, it would be important to analyse the following documents:

- Explanatory reports of yearly activity.
- Documents and materials containing statements on the philosophy, guidelines and purposes of the public body.
- Formal documents from the management, namely:
  - training handbooks;
  - plans and strategies;
  - organizational charts.
- Existing documents on past events.

### *Surveys and interviews*

The purest method to draw conclusions on the values that are shared in public administrations is by contrasting the opinions of those who have any kind of relationship with the organization, be it direct or indirect. In a few words, some aspects to be analyzed among managers are: how long they have held the post, their knowledge of past events, their views on the management philosophy of the public agency, the criteria used to arrange the organizational chart, their own ideas on strategy, and their impressions of the culture which, in their opinion, are held by their department and public administration in general.

In the case of employees, a study should be made of: the time they have held the post and the reasons which led them to join the agency; their own version of the story; anecdotes and alleged stories; their own view on staff policy; their opinion on the suitability of the facilities; and their impressions of the culture which in their opinion are held by the organization.

As for customers and citizens in general, we should study the efficiency of the service and the degree of fulfilment of the agency's duties.

Once we have seen the origin, the functions and the diagnosis model, we may analyze the typology. In this respect, Sinclair (1991) lists four different models of public administration culture:

- (1) *Cultural control model*. It is based on the existence of only one culture, based on control.
- (2) *Subculture model*. The basic hypothesis is that public administration has a number of different, independent subcultures, depending on the growing incorporation of professionals and specialists sharing common features, which differ from those of others.

- (3) *Professionals' multicultural model*. It recognizes the existence of subcultures but, unlike the previous model, they are grouped under a strong, homogeneous culture common to all public agencies.
- (4) *Public service or public interest culture model*. There is a common culture, but its main feature is its orientations towards public service.

For our part, we may re-group this classification, as we believe that, regardless of whether there are subcultures or not, the orientation of public values may follow two basic tendencies, which we shall term a bureaucratic culture, on the one hand, and a culture predisposed towards serving the public, on the other; we shall explain these two possibilities in the following section.

### **Problems of bureaucratic culture and characteristics of public orientation**

When Weber (1979) listed the positive characteristics of bureaucracy (hierarchical structure, task division, formal rules and regulation), he surely did not mean that they should result, in public administration, in a specific culture with negative characteristics like the ones pointed out by Savas (1982), for whom public administration becomes inefficient, inflexible and irresponsible before citizens.

This cultural typology, which is widespread among many public agencies, has been described in plenty of ways, depending on the specific trait which is emphasized. Thus, Feldman (1985) calls it culture of conformity, Adams and Ingersoll (1990) term it culture of technical rationality, for Ban (1995) it is a culture of control, and Deal and Kennedy (1982) have defined it as a culture of process. All these labels help us to have a general notion of the distinctive features of this classification; however, we would like to delimit further its specific characteristics.

In this way, when we mention bureaucratic culture as a general feature of public administration, the truth is that many departments and sections show it in a specific way, within what we might term bureaucratic subcultures. Thus, Aucoin (1991), Bozeman (1987) and Bate (1990) agree that bureaucracy in public administration tends to act as a conglomerate of independent organizations, each with its own interests, specific goals and own language as used by its members.

At this stage, we cannot say categorically that a bureaucratic culture is a negative one, although it does seem that these values appear when there is, on the one hand, an excessive conformism amongst employees and, on the other, a higher authority appropriation by the management. This leads to passiveness, mechanicism and lack of new ideas, which are negative features. In this respect, Kono (1990), Meyer (1985) and Morse (1986) confirm that a bureaucratic culture implies a stability that is usually detrimental to the needs of an innovative process and, therefore, to any kind of change.

Summarizing what we have said so far, we may establish the generic features of this bureaucratic tendency:

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- The management style is authoritarian, and there is a high degree of control.
  - There is little communication, and the management is usually an univocal, top-down one.
  - Individuals search for stability, have limited scope for initiative, and are oriented towards obeying orders.
  - The decision-making process is repetitive and centralized.
  - There is reluctance to start innovative processes.
  - There are high degrees of conformity.
  - These beliefs are highly reluctant to change.

In view of the proven inefficiency of bureaucratic culture in public administration, we may consider a different kind of corporate culture, more in agreement with the aims that this kind of agency should envisage; this is what we call citizen-oriented culture.

In order to describe the features of this new culture, we may quote Stewart and Clarke (1987), for whom a public service orientation is based on the following assumptions:

- The tasks and activities that are carried out in a public agency are solely aimed at usefully serving the citizens.
- The organization will be judged according to the quality of the service given with the resources available.
- The service offered will be a shared value provided that it is shared by all members of the organization.
- A high quality service is sought.
- Quality in service requires a real approach to the citizen.

For our part, we may add to this list the following features:

- The citizens have a primary role in the scale of shared values.
- There is frequent contact with the citizens.
- The problems that arise in public service are thoroughly analyzed.
- Prompt service is sought by all members of a section or department of public administration.
- The way citizens are treated is usually governed by previous rules.

### **Transforming a bureaucratic culture: an initial approach**

From what we have seen in the previous section, we may detect that the daily routines and habits of those who live within a bureaucratic culture lead to safety and conformity, and therefore the modification of these working habits will result in anxiety and discomfort. This is why employees generally prefer not to incorporate new ways of understanding their work. Besides, as is shown

by Kim *et al.* (1995), the process of cultural change encounters different degrees of difficulty depending on the public agency; thus, the situation in a town council differs from that of a province, an autonomous region or the State in general.

In addition to this, there is not much agreement on how to change the organizational culture of public administration, for these schemes to succeed; in this sense, there is not even a unified methodology for such change (Milakovich, 1991; Bourgault *et al.*, 1993). Also, the culture of an agency must not be modified in order to adapt to any change in political orientation or to a specific strategy, the latter being a method which is to be used in very special situations.

In this light, the wide variety of management techniques (either genuine or imported) in the private sector has led to confusion among the professional managers of public administrations. Radin and Coffee (1993) have eloquently described how the CEOs in the public sector that have survived the budget planning systems, zero growth budgets and quality circles, are logically sceptical before further managerial reforms such as total quality or the change in organizational culture.

Whorton and Worthley (1981) hold that all these managerial techniques have failed to succeed in public administration because of the resistance offered by the bureaucratic culture of these agencies. This is why Allison (1984) even believes that improvement in the results of public administration does not come from massively borrowing the techniques and models used in private corporations. They must result from improving the development of managerial functions in public administration, once there are an awareness and recognition of the function of public management.

For our part, we consider that the main situations or factors that lead to a change in the culture of a public agency are the following:

- If it is a formalistic, static and bureaucratic culture, which makes it impossible to offer citizens an adequate service; this is also pointed out by Lane and Wolf (1990) and Osborne and Gaebler (1992).
- When there is a joint project by different organizations, in which contrary positions may lead to a failure of initial prospects.

In short, any process of cultural change in a public agency would be based, according to Metcalfe and Richards (1987), on a transition from a subservice culture to a culture of responsibility, from a continuity culture to a culture of innovation, from a budgeted cost culture to a culture of cost awareness, and from a stability culture to a culture of progressive development. In other words: from an administrative culture of conformity with procedures to a culture of performance. This is much more directly expressed by Keston (1992), for whom the public services sector must move towards a culture which is not afraid of making decisions that imply a certain degree of improvisation and risk.

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It is clear that public administration may modify its bureaucratic culture. In this way, we shall underline, chronologically, the methodology that must be used and how it would be applicable for our specific purpose.

### *1. Making a diagnosis of the present culture*

This consists of becoming aware of the values shared at present. The reason for this initial stage is that it would be pointless to start making changes in order to modify a situation which is not completely understood. Besides, it is interesting not only to discover the specific category of the culture (whether it is bureaucratic or not); it is also necessary to know to what degree it is shared.

### *2. Explaining the need for modifications*

That is, if it is due to a legal need, or in order to develop projects together with other organizations, etc.; in our case the purpose would be to improve the satisfaction level of citizens. This point is relevant, for it allows us to decide whether we should make the whole effort for cultural correction or, on the contrary, it is better to give up the project as planned (at this point, if it is a strong bureaucratic culture with a mechanical view, we already know about the need for change).

### *3. Defining the values desired*

This stage is vital, for it will determine all the actions that are subsequently taken. Moreover, as the present situation is already known, the degree of effort for correction will be estimated. On some occasions, it is necessary to change the whole orientation of values; in other circumstances it will be enough to strengthen or modify some aspect. In our case, the ultimate purpose is the wish to serve citizens better.

### *4. Involving management*

Indeed, the decision to make changes is reached at a high management level, and hence managers must be the first group to accept it. This is due to the fact that, on the one hand, this group will be the one encouraging the whole replacement methodology and, on the other, their behaviour will set an example for the rest of the staff.

### *5. Making collaborators aware of this new need*

Despite the importance of the previous stage, this is also fundamental, since the shared beliefs are more powerful than any organizational hierarchy. This is not an easy process, but it may be implemented if the staff become involved and the communication channels are improved (Boxx *et al.*, 1991; Watson and Burkhalter, 1992; Zamanou and Glaser, 1994).

### *6. Changing the symbols*

As it is usually not enough to simply enumerate the values desired, it will be necessary to support the changes by means of drawing the material and

immaterial symbols closer to the purposes desired. In addition to this, a potential effort would be to reward, not only economically but in any other way, those who gladly accept these changes, which are unarguably unpleasant for many of them.

*7. Replacing the training programmes, in such a way that employees learn the values desired at present*

This is due to the fact that it is more feasible to train the staff in a corporate spirit than by modifying it. The benefit of this measure is that these people do not need to change their ideas towards the corporation; rather, since the starting point is an immature view, it is possible to assimilate a number of specific notions without generating personal confusion. Thus, for example, Perry (1993) suggests that a way to improve staff performance and the culture of a public agency is by moving from specialized structures, based on functions, towards structures based on co-ordinated working teams. We believe that a way to implement this proposal is by including this proposal in training programmes.

*8. Periodically revising the values*

It is interesting, every now and then, to remind people of the corporate concept that supports the whole structure of the organization. The point here is that, although apparently the values have already settled, such values, due to the short period which has elapsed since their introduction and consolidation, are still weak. In addition to this, it would be suitable to listen to citizens' opinions, in order to detect if they can notice an improvement in the way they are treated by public agencies.

**Conclusions**

In a public agency, the economic resources and infrastructure are important, but undoubtedly it will be the people who, through their management and daily work, will ensure an adequate public service.

Thus, in our analysis we have detected that a suitable management of organizational culture in a public agency may be a decisive factor in improving the service offered to the citizens. This is not a theoretical assertion; it is possible to apply a methodology of cultural diagnosis, detect whether there is a negative bureaucratic culture and, in such cases, apply a procedure for a real transformation of these values.

This is a process that will be resource- and time-consuming, but if we really want public administration (a specific section or the whole administration) to have a real, perceived vocation to serve the citizens, this is a task that public administrators have before them.

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## Apologia

"Managing diversity – an employment and service delivery challenge" by Elisabeth M. Wilson and Paul A. Iles, published in *IJPSM*, Vol. 12 No. 1, 1999 contained errors. The Editor and Publisher apologise for these. The correct affiliation for one of the authors, Elisabeth M. Wilson, should have been:

*Institute for Development Policy and Management,  
University of Manchester, UK.*

Also an acknowledgement should have appeared as a footnote to the paper. It is included in full here.

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