On why improving performance in the Twenty-First Century requires

Delegating Both Responsibility *and* Discretion

How does a public manager get public employees to produce results? The traditional answer is: Tell them precisely what to do. Don't give them any room for discretion. If you do, they'll just exploit the opportunity for their own, personal advantage.

For over a century, democracies have sought to limit—more accurately prevent—public managers from exercising discretion. Such constraints are not, however, designed to produce results. They are designed to prevent corruption.

Indeed, for progressive-era reformers who wanted to improve government, the performance problem *was* the corruption problem. In their campaign to clean up government the poster child was William "Boss" Tweed, who, from 1858 to 1871, ran New York City's Tammany Hall.

The "posters" were Thomas Nast's cartoons, in *Harper's Weekly.* The message was clear and simple: If public employees can exercise discretion, they can and will make choices that benefit themselves not citizens.

Particularly important was limiting a public manager's ability to decide whom to hire (and fire) and with whom to contract for a product or service. For if public managers had these kinds of discretion, they could —and would—hire their cousins and give contracts to their friends.

To the rescue came two reforms: civil service and low-bid contracts.

Public employees could only be hired to perform specific tasks narrowly defined in a job description and only based on "merit." And this merit was to be determined by each applicant's answers on an objective test tied to the job description.

Contracts were also to be narrowly constrained with all deliverables completely delineated in the request for proposals, so that the "best" proposal would be—obviously—the lowest bid.

Maybe in the industrial era, it was possible to explicitly and narrowly define what were—and were not— any particular employee's tasks. After all, Frederick Winslow Taylor devoted his professional life to defining each step involved in doing any particular job and then to identifying the specific skills that an individual required to do that job. Yet even a century ago, Taylor's "scientific management" was not all that scientific.

What happens, however, when it is not possible to define—explicitly and completely—how best to achieve a specific public purpose in all organizational and political circumstances. Then narrowly constraining the manager's discretion makes zero sense. The manager with the responsibility to achieve the purpose needs both the skill and authority to figure out how best to produce the desired results.

> To accomplish public purposes, public managers need the discretion necessary to figure out how to best produce the required results. Thus, we need enough constraints on corruption that we can, indeed, delegate *both* responsibility *and* discretion.

The question of discretion is a major topic in Michael Lipsky's classic book, *Street-Level Bureaucracy.* Lipsky focuses, however, not on the discretion exercised by managers who are designing a strategy. Instead, Lipsky examines the discretion exercised by government's front-line employees.

Indeed, because they are not being observed by their boss, Lipsky's "street-level bureaucrats" exercise a lot of discretion. For example, when cops pull people over for driving 71 miles per hour in a 60-mph zone, they have the discretion to issue a ticket or give a warning. Indeed much of today's debate about whether cops should wear video cameras reflects their ability to exercise discretion.

Responsibility plus discretion. No one objects to the responsibility part

of this equation. Certainly public managers should be *responsible* for achieving public purposes.

The *discretion* is what makes people nervous. For discretion creates the opportunity for corruption.

Unfortunately, we can't make managers responsible for accomplishing public purposes without also giving them the discretion necessary to design effective strategies for doing so.

To employ twenty-first-century strategies for improving the performance of any organization (public, private, or non-profit), managers need discretion—plus the ability to delegate discretion. No manager possesses the knowledge and wisdom necessary to specify every individual's every duty.

Yes: Public managers need to establish specific purposes for agencies and teams to accomplish. Yes: These same managers need to set targets for teams and individuals to achieve.

But these managers can no longer fool themselves into believing that they should micro-manage every detail of every subordinate's work.

To inspire staff to engage fully in the challenge of producing results, managers have to delegate responsibility and discretion. After all, people will work harder to demonstrate that their own ideas are effective than to prove that their boss is a genius.

Today, if we want to accomplish public purposes, we need to create enough constraints on corruption so that we can, indeed, delegate *both* responsibility *and* discretion.

Responsibility and discretion: As Frank Sinatra once sang about another important institution: "You can't have one without the other." **B**

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