# ORGANIZING TO SERVE THE PUBLIC: PROCESSING OR DEVELOPING THE CLIENTELE?

Robert I. McLaren

#### **ABSTRACT**

Since at least the time of the publication of Reinventing Government (Osborne and Gaebler, 1993), it seems that virtually every New Public Management book has echoed the cry that the public service must do a better job of serving the public, and of envisioning the public as the customers of their public sector organizations (Denhardt, 1993a; Aucoin, 1995; Seidle, 1995; Kernaghan et al., 2000). Even studies that are critical of NPM still observe that service to the public is a necessary component of modern public sector management (Charih and Daniels, 1997; Peters and Savoie, 1998). It has to be presumed that to serve the public is an important reason why public sector organizations exist. However, there seems to be something missing in the NPM conceptual approach to analysis of service provision. In this contribution the author focuses on an important but missing component. In the public sector, are we processing people or developing them? What are the implications of one approach versus the other?

#### INTRODUCTION: THE LITERATURE

Anything beyond the general platitude to serve the customer in a better manner appears to be ignored in the literature on public sector management. "Service to the customer" seems to be the sum total of the New Public Management (NPM) mantra. For example, although Leslie Seidle (1995) attempted to go beyond simplistic conceptualization in identifying typologies concerning the supposedly-different ways that the public is served -- voluntary users, entitled users, and compelled users -- and core, tangible, and augmented services, neither typology identified the customer/citizen/client as anybody other than a person who confronts a public servant at a counter. As one author summarized, "...perform a service or produce a product..." (Cope, 1997: 464). Robert Denhardt wanted his readers to adopt, "... an alternative style of management aimed not at control but rather at assisting individuals (members or clients) in discovering and pursuing their own developmental needs..." (Denhardt, 1993b: 204), but his book was intended as a review of the literature and he did not attempt any analysis of the organizational problems that might result from implementing this alternative style. Eran Vigoda (Vigoda, 2000) demonstrated a relationship between citizens and the responsiveness of public administrators, but the focus was on the evaluation of citizen satisfaction, not what the public administration should do to be better organized to provide satisfaction. That is, none of the authors appears to recognize that providing services to the customer can be a complex organizational problem of a magnitude far beyond the simplistic concepts of the NPM mantra.

One exception to this argument is the work of Christopher Pollitt (Pollitt, 1993), but unfortunately he did not push his recognition to its logical conclusion. Pollitt examined service to the public under the rubric of people-processing, and noted that "...the generic model of the consumer is a poor guide to many *private*-sector transactions as

well as most of those in the public services" (Pollitt, 1993: 126). His argument was that private-sector transactions are not all just handled at a counter, but can call for lengthy interactions between buyers and sellers in which either or both undergo significant development, and he used a lawyer-client situation as an example. This can be called a people-developing relationship as opposed to the stereotypical people-processing interaction done over a counter between a buyer and a seller. It is of paramount importance to the topic of organizing to serve the public. However, Pollitt did not go beyond his critique to discuss its ramifications. This article will attempt to meet this challenge.

### THE PUBLIC MANAGEMENT LITERATURE

A review of the public management literature on the question of serving the public indicates an overwhelming emphasis on the people-processing perspective, not the people-developing one. Historically, the concern in the study and practice of public administration has been the determination of the proper basis for structuring an organization, with thought about the client/citizen/customer to be at best an after-thought. Whether referred to as the division of labor, specialization, departmentalization, unit grouping, or whatever, authors argue that each organization must derive a method for organizing employees into work groups so as to achieve, in an optimal manner, the goals of that organization (Palfrey et al, 1992: 66-80; Eliassen and Kooiman, 1993).

## The Management Literature in General

The management literature indicates that there *are* a variety of bases for this differentiation. For public institutions, the classical bases for organizing have been those of Luther Gulick -- purpose, process, people, and place (Gulick, 1969). However, Gulick is relatively alone in noting that the organizing can be done on the bases of the external environment, such as the client being served. Elsewhere, a common thread in the public administration literature has been an emphasis on the internal dynamics of the organization. That is, the concern has been almost exclusively on such concepts as the number of levels in the hierarchy and the span of control (Simon, 1965), power and organizational politics (Pfeffer, 1981), the costs of coordination (Thompson, 1967). The more modern focus of contingency theorists on public sector organizations does not alter this; one will still find the emphasis placed on such internal elements as budgeting and power (Giroux et al, 1986) or perhaps cultural differences (Nonaka, 1985).

One might certainly have expected a discussion of organizing on the basis of the client in such a work as Amitai Etzioni's chapter on "modern organizations and the client" (Etzioni, 1964). However, his dominant point was that, while control of consumption and choice may be retained by the client, any control of the organizational distribution system by the client should be taken away. That is, the organization should know what is best for the client and should create whatever organizational form it thinks is necessary to service that person. [It can be concluded that Etzioni did not subscribe to NPM.] While Etzioni said that the structure will vary from organization to organization, the overall implication of his chapter was that organizations should neither give, nor need to give, much consideration to their clients in determining the basis upon which the organizations should be structured. This conclusion was reinforced by Peter Blau

and Richard Scott when they wrote about public sector professionals and their clients: "... since clients are not qualified to evaluate the services they need, the professional who lets his clients decide what services he is to furnish does not provide optimum service to them" (Blau and Scott, 1962: 52). Other writers who have focussed on client-organizational problems were usually less bloody-minded with regard to their clients' qualifications, but they have still not seen totally different organizational forms as a consequence of how the organization viewed its clients (Katz and Khan, 1966; Rosengren and Lefton, 1970; Ferlie, et al., 1996; Pollitt, Birchall, and Putnam, 1998). An exception that proved the rule occurred where one author examined four models of consumerism, but the models simply emphasized different organizational concerns, such as power and accountability, and did not examine different organizational forms that might be required as a result (Winkler, 1987).

It can be concluded that the concern in the literature has rarely, if ever, been on the effect of the organization on its clients, the receivers of the goods and services that the organization is producing. Yet it may be presumed, as NPM does, that to serve these persons is the reason the public sector organization was created and exists. Most organizations, especially in the public sector, are providing a service to an outsider; however, this outsider, the client, appears to be treated in a very cavalier manner at best in the management literature. Even in Gulick's study where he first identified the concept of organizing on the basis of clientele or people, his discussion did not deal with any effects of the organization on the client, or with any internal structural changes that are required to organize on the basis of persons; it dealt simply with whether an employee should be a generalist or a specialist to provide the best service (Gulick, 1969: 25-26).

## THE PUBLIC MANAGEMENT LITERATURE

The public administration/management literature focusing on the issue of bureaucratic responsiveness, or the approach of bureaucrats to their clients, appears to be no different -- the emphasis of the principal writers has been on the concerns and problems of the bureaucracy, not on those of the clients (Scott, 1969; Marini, 1971; Saltzstein, 1985). With the important exception of the advocates of non-hierarchical organizations, to be examined in the next paragraphs, it can be concluded that organizing on the basis of the client -- that is, organizing to serve the public -- has traditionally gone no further than analysis of demographic categorizations -- visible minorities, veterans, females, immigrants, seniors -- with little or no treatment of how this basis of organizing will produce an organizational form that is different from any other basis of organizing.

## An Exception: The Non-Hierarchical Organization

The important exception to the previous conclusion can be found in contributions from a few writers concerned in the early 1970s with the creation of non-hierarchical organizations. Fred Thayer identified a 'charrette' as a client-oriented means for attempting to solve community problems:

The only known way to begin is to assemble in one place, say a large auditorium or arena, people whose perspectives encompass the major conflicts within a community. These may include ghetto residents, policemen and police chiefs, elected and appointed public officials, professional civil servants, affluent

suburbanites, businessmen, and others. All they have in common when they begin is a temporary agreement that there is a problem to be solved, that they want to explore it, and that they will bring in professional process-facilitators. If the process survives an initial period of intense hostility, subcommittees are formed, consultants are attached to each one, and interaction is continued. Each group is structured to include persons whose interests are diametrically opposed. Periodic progress is reported to the entire body, or to the steering committee, so that conflicts between subcommittees can be worked out. Individuals move back and forth between groups until they find the one of greatest concern to them, or until they decide to leave (Thayer, 1973: 30).

However, the charrette was seen by its participants [to Thayer's regret] to be a temporary vehicle that would in time be replaced by the more traditional and permanent structures of a bureaucracy.

Orion White outlined a "dialectical" organization as a long-term [although probably smaller] form of the charrette, and illustrated his analysis with reference to an existing "...private, church-related social service agency..." (White, 1969: 35). Its structural differences from traditional hierarchical forms of organizations can be seen in the following statement of its benefits and liabilities: "Because of the rather unstructured, heterogeneous, and egalitarian nature of the agency, much flexibility and freedom of communication is obtained. At the same time, the efficient conflict-dampening and ambiguity-relieving effects of hierarchy are absent, and other more costly administrative techniques must be employed by the agency director as a substitute. A continuing socialization effort must be carried on in the agency" (White, 1969: 39).

However, it would not appear that the non-hierarchical forms of organization have become very prevalent in Western societies, perhaps because of the costs that White refers to, perhaps because of the assumed temporariness that Thayer refers to, perhaps because it can be claimed that the basic principle of organizing is to create hierarchy (Simon, 1960).

## THE PROBLEM: PEOPLE-PROCESSING OR PEOPLE-DEVELOPING?

Under the emphasis of NPM, organizing to serve the public can hardly be ignored, forgotten, or dismissed as the traditional public management literature was wont to do. If the neglect of the client illustrated in the above viewpoints was accepted in the past, it can hardly be deemed to be acceptable in the present. A significant change has occurred in the relationship between the organization and its clients, especially throughout the public sector. NPM has arrived.

However, NPM must do more than just arrive. First and foremost, it must be made to recognize that modern public organizations are not just trying to ensure that the material wants of their clients are satisfied; they are as well trying to change the behavior patterns of these clients, to help these people grow, develop, mature. That is, they can be said to be working on the inner, psychological needs and wants of their clients, not just the external, physiological concerns that the traditional literature and the NPM advocates have emphasized. This produces a fundamental distinction between the past and the present in the practice of organizing to serve the public.

Nowadays, many modern public organizations are being asked to become peopledeveloping organizations, not just people-processing organizations. People-processing [which includes such activities as: the receipt of applications; the collection of fees; the mailing of forms] is still a requirement of the public service. However, the capacity for computerization means that it will always be a less significant activity. The dominant need and activity is switching to that of people-developing [which includes such activities as: drug counseling and rehabilitation; the inculcation of good work habits among welfare recipients; training and educating for entrepreneurship; converting young offenders into law-abiding citizens]. Therefore, it should not be assumed that the traditional, bureaucratic form of public sector organization that processes citizens will remain the most effective form when the demand is for developing people. It should not be assumed that the definition of service to the public only refers to a citizen appearing at a counter before some public servant, whether compelled or voluntary. Peopledeveloping as a type of organizing may well necessitate a different organizational structure, one that is not solely concerned with the internal dynamics of the organization but is concerned with the place of the client within the problem arena of the organization.

## The Role of the Client in People-Developing

Assuming the validity of the above conclusion, it should also not be assumed that these new organizing decisions will be straightforward. To start, for client-centered organizations concerned with people-developing, it would seem logical that the first step would be to ascertain the role of the user of the service, the client, before any formal organizational structure could be rationally established. However, that role is not necessarily a simple matter to determine. It involves a value-laden, subjective decision on the part of some person or collectivity. More importantly, the role that is eventually chosen will be the prime determinant of how the service should be provided and of the effect of the organization upon the client. Furthermore, to the extent that others do not agree that the selected role is the appropriate one, or has the highest priority if there are several roles to be considered, there will be public dissatisfaction with the service and the organization, and with the political leadership that authorized the decision. That is, any single role within an organization, especially when it is the role of an uncontrolled external variable, such as a customer, may create a variety of perspectives, both inside and outside the organization, with regard to expectations about that one role. When the customer is a client of a public sector organization that wishes not just to provide the person with some item but that wishes to permanently alter the person's behavior in some way, it can be expected that the variety of client perspectives is unlikely to be satisfied by only one organizational form, the one division of labor, that must eventually be chosen. The public sector organization must, therefore, either disappoint some of the public, or attempt to be "all things to all people," i.e., employing a satisficing rather than an optimizing strategy. Is this option satisfactory to satisfy the ambitious claims of NPM for improvement of public service quality?

## AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE PROBLEM

To illustrate this thesis, this article will deal with only two facets of public service provision -- cost and quality considerations. Often it has been claimed that, of all the facets of organizations, these two are the most important to decisions concerning the

provision of services in the public sector (Wade and Curry, 1970). Quality of service provided to the client is usually tempered by the cost of providing that particular service; this is conceived to be the fundamental trade-off or conflict for any organization, be it a government department, a hospital, or even a business (Okun, 1975). It provides the necessary illustration of the organizing problems inherent in a public sector climate of trying to satisfy multiple expectations.

To illustrate the dimensions of the problem, universities will be used to represent people-developing public organizations. However, only the relationship between undergraduates and professors will be examined. Such other questions as the needs of graduate students versus undergraduates, or research emphasis by the faculty versus teaching will be largely ignored. While these concerns are relevant to the problem, their inclusion would merely create further complexity without negating the thesis. Their omission does not alter the argument -- except in so far as their inclusion in the real world might cause any administrator to so despair of reconciling them that a traditional hierarchical bureaucracy might be adopted by default.

There are at least four major perspectives with which to view the client role of university undergraduates: (1) apprentices learning from masters; (2) workers in a factory; (3) consumers of a product [the NPM choice?]; and (4) products being manufactured.

## 1. Apprentices and Masters

If students are considered as individual apprentices attached for a number of years to masters, the organizational principle of the proper span of control for each master is of paramount importance. A guild system is the model [or a tutorial system in university parlance] and the university will be composed of small, intimate units. As a result, the student-faculty ratio will be low. If the normal institutional requirements for buildings, libraries, heating, et al. are assumed, the average cost of educating each student will be high, certainly in comparison to any other system. Moreover, spaces will be limited and so there will not be a high percentage of university graduates in the society. However, selection of both students and professors can be easily controlled and high standards should be obtained. That is, quantity and quality of graduates will be inversely proportional. In summary, the university will be a collegial system, loosely organized without the need for many hierarchical levels. Support services can be handled by a separate administrative component leaving the professors free to teach. This system will probably be the best for achieving excellence in the graduates, but is unlikely to contribute towards achieving equality of opportunity in the university or society.

## 2. Workers in a Factory

A second possible perspective is that the undergraduate student relationship to the university is comparable to that of a worker in a factory. Two directions follow from this. On the one hand, the hierarchical relationships of the mechanistic model of production will explain the position of the students at the bottom of the organization. On the other hand, a model of industrial democracy or worker participation in decision making is also feasible, if one assumes a more organic system of management (Burns and Stalker, 1966).

In the first model, students will be told what they must do and will either accept that or fight back, for example, through the formation of unions. One should expect that as little money as possible will be spent satisfying the needs of the students in order that the fixed costs of the necessary hierarchical levels of faculty and administrators can be high while the overall budget remains reasonable. Cost considerations will be quite important in this system while the quality of education will be secondary to such organizational requirements as lines of authority, procedures, and efficiency (Callahan, 1962). The characteristics of the mechanistic model will prevail.

On the other hand, worker participation in decision making is a possible model for this second perspective. In this case, the only hierarchy or organizational arrangements to be created will be initiated by the students. Professors and administrators will be selected by the students, probably to replicate the tutorial pattern. Quality of education may be the goal of the university, but accreditation may be the only objective. In either case, the animosity of the students towards the university, in comparison to the mechanistic model, should be lessened. Costs may well be at a minimum under this model since the control apparatus of the tutorial system is not required; however, there is no assurance of quality in the final product either, so that a society may decide that it should be paying more -- and receiving more.

#### 3. Consumers of a Product

As NPM devotees would seem to prefer, undergraduate students may be envisioned as consumers of a product. In this situation, the university may be compared to the businessperson. Students pay a certain price and in exchange they receive a product. If they do not like the product, they can go elsewhere. [The motto of the university could be "caveat emptor" or even "double your money back if goods are not satisfactory"]. The situation is that of monopolistic competition -- not a monopoly since students can go elsewhere, but not perfect competition either as the products are not homogeneous and alternative universities may not be easily accessible to particular students (Gill, 1973). Under monopolistic competition, *marketing* becomes the most important concern as each university attempts to appeal to the customer/student through product differentiation.

If it wants to keep the per student costs of marketing as low as possible, the university must strive to obtain as many customers as it can. Thus, quality of education may become of secondary importance as long as the standard of education remains above some satisfactory level so that the product continues to be purchased. For example, the hiring of an expensive "name" professor might be pursued as a strategy, but the person must then be assigned to large classes rather than small seminars in order that the per student cost of the professor be kept to a minimum. With the large numbers of students that it is necessary for the university to attract in this case, economies of scale become important and hierarchical control arrangements must be established to manufacture education as cheaply and as efficiently as possible. The stability of the hierarchical, mechanistic model of production will be desired rather than the unstable, organic model associated with innovation.

If for some reason, a university has a captive market, it could transfer some of its expenditures by spending less on marketing and more on the pursuit of quality. However, like any well-known brand-name product, such as Coca-Cola, that must still

continue to advertize even though the whole world knows about its existence, it would do this at the risk of attracting fewer customers, both as a result of the decreased marketing and as a result of the higher standards.

#### 4. Products Manufactured

Lastly, the undergraduate student may be viewed as the product itself, and again there are two possible models. In one model, if the concern is with control procedures to ensure the quality of the product is above some standard and, if there is also concern with keeping costs to a minimum, then the assembly-line approach -- the product layout -- will be the recommended model. The alternative is the process [or functional] layout.

Product layouts are most advantageous where there is a high volume of production of each specific product [the students of the different faculties or majors], where the rate of production due to consumer demand is stable, and where many of the parts going into the products are uniform and interchangeable (Hopeman, 1971). In the university setting, the last of these is obtained through such a strategy as an introductory economics course being taken by students from many different faculties rather than having each faculty establishing its own version of an economics course for its own students. Universities will pursue these three conditions and the society may not object since there will be a large number of each of the different types of graduates, each type standardized for its use.

On the other hand, the process layout emphasizes flexibility and variation among the finished products, even within the same category of product. The finished products from a process layout will probably be of higher quality because they are more specialized, but they will also be more expensive to produce. For example, each faculty will teach its own version of the necessary concepts in introductory economics; over the whole university, some classes will be large, some small, and overall many faculty members will be used at an overall lower [and therefore more expensive] student-faculty ratio. In contrast to the emphasis in the product layout on high volume products and processes, the process layout will be a university where there are lots of small "shops" in esoteric disciplines, catering to innovation and the creation of knowledge rather than to the desires of a mass consumption society. Once again, each model emphasizes a different goal and the recommended organizational structure is derived from that goal.

A number of other examples to illustrate the point in question may be drawn from the public sector. A hospital patient may be viewed as a product to be repaired, a consumer purchasing a product, a guinea pig in a research laboratory, or a worker who has to be given directions constantly (Heydebrand, 1973). Similar to undergraduate students, each perspective will lead to a different organizing principle. Criminals can be viewed as animals requiring various types of security depending upon their ferocity, as goods-in-process requiring various chronological inputs as they pass through the system, as humans at various stages of life requiring economic training, etc. (Plumptre, 1988). Each client perspective is best served by a different organizational form, as suggested for university undergraduates.

From the above perspectives, it can be concluded that there are a variety of approaches that may be used to organize a university or any public sector organization to serve its clients. Moreover, the final resolution does not require a mutually exclusive solution; it is possible to combine two or more approaches in any particular organization, and it is

possible for a society to organize some of its public organizations according to one perspective and some according to another. [And, of course, with universities it can be contested that the undergraduate student is not the highest priority client .] Overall, however, some person or some collectivity in each society must determine which perspective is the appropriate one for each situation, recognizing the consequences that will ensue from any system for the service of the public, e.g., for education of the undergraduates. To not make the determination is to leave both the society and the institution, especially the employees (e.g., faculty and the students) confused. To organize on any basis other than to serve the public would appear to "thumb one's nose" at the demands for involvement and participation by clients, such as students, and the general populace. It appears that governments and public organizations can no longer hide behind the excuse that it is impossible for them to identify and clarify the objectives of the institutions and the most appropriate organizational forms and processes for service provision. However, the NPM and public management literature does not address these critical choices very well, if at all.

#### **CONCLUSIONS**

A distinction must be made in the NPM literature and it practice about providers of public services as to whether they are in a people-processing or a people-developing situation. Organizing to serve the public has vastly different implications and consequences for each of these modes.

It would seem that the traditional emphasis of organizing public service provision on the basis of clientele -- veterans, natives, refugees, patients -- has reflected a perspective that these are people-processing situations that would best be handled by a Gulick principle hierarchical bureaucracy as the appropriate organizational form. This perspective could even call for "teamwork" amongst the professionals (DHSS, 1979), or perhaps a "network" (Bate, 2000), but still the focus is on the organization, not the consumers.

However, in people-developing situations, neither the hierarchy nor the network/teamwork organizational form is necessarily appropriate -- both the process for effecting the change and the desired result or outcome must be considered in the creation of the appropriate organizational form.

The NPM command for organizations to serve the public seem to be simplistic. If the public is simply to step up to a counter and be served by a clerk, then there is scarcely anything new in this -- it has been handled more or less well for decades depending upon the personalities of the clerk and the customer. However, when serving the public connotes a need to help develop the customer, a totally different situation is required. Now the appropriate organizational form cannot be assumed away, at least not until some agreement has been reached as to what role in the development process the customer is to play.

The first step in the process is to attempt to reach some agreement among all the various stakeholders as to what this role constitutes -- that is, what constitutes client development in the particular situation? What are we trying to do for university students and what is their role? What are we trying to do for prisoners and what is their role? What are we trying to do for hospital patients and what is their role? What about welfare

mothers, etc.? In essence, what is meant by development of the person in each of these examples? In the public sector where political liberalism is required to find a compromise among virtually all differing perspectives, one cannot conclude this is a simple task. The NPM and management literature needs to address this issue more directly and conclusively.

Robert I. McLaren is Professor of Public and International Administration, University of Regina, <a href="mailto:robert.mclaren@uregina.ca">robert.mclaren@uregina.ca</a>

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