

# BALANCING CUSTOMER SERVICE, EMPOWERMENT AND PERFORMANCE WITH CITIZENSHIP, RESPONSIVENESS AND POLITICAL ACCOUNTABILITY

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## ABSTRACT

*Responding to demands from recipients for better customer service while simultaneously respecting the rights and responsibilities of citizens are major challenges facing public managers. One of the long-term results of the decade-long "reinventing government" movement is that most citizens now expect public services to be "as good or better" than those provided by the private sector. In theory, successful efforts to satisfy customers in any type of organization - - public, private, or non-profit - - should convince public managers to respond to citizens in a like manner. Relationships among governments and individual citizens, however, are more complicated than interactions between private corporations and their customers. Fulfilling legal and political obligations while at the same time "putting customers first" requires a comprehensive bottom-up reexamination of long-standing public management practices, genuine employee empowerment, responsiveness to citizens as valued customers, and changes in the management and oversight responsibilities of public officials. This article shows how quality theories and strategies can be used to change management systems, redefine roles and responsibilities, and transfer the "best practices" of private firms and public agencies.*

"Management's emphasis on productivity without a proportionate emphasis on quality and customer service issues can foster confusion and misperceptions with the front-line employees." (Audit of IRS practices, 1997)

Citizens now expect more accountability, better service and lower taxes from governments. Most public agencies, however, still lack successful models, management case studies or strategic guidance for improving service and maintaining costs within their own organizations. Anecdotal evidence is widely available from private consultants, but such advice comes at a high price: it is often contradictory, ideologically biased, industry-specific, and self-serving. There is a pervasive need for objective theory and empirical research to guide and inform public managers about the "best practices" for improving customer service in various types of public agencies. In addition, elected political leaders and appointed senior managers should be more actively involved in change processes; different motivators can be used to encourage public managers, especially at the state and local level, to reorient management systems to become customer-focused; and citizens must demand greater "civic accountability" from appointed and elected officials to balance competing administrative and political values. In many jurisdictions, elected officials and public managers are redesigning processes to measure and meet citizen demands for greater responsiveness. Guidelines for managers and politicians to empower employees and respond to citizens as customers are referred to in this article as "point-of-contact" accountability and discussed below (See Table 1)

For the past decade, private industry has focused on improving customer service, as part of a broader quality management effort. As businesses focused on meeting the needs of customers, non value-added costs were eliminated, systems became more efficient, product and service costs decreased, and consumers benefited. Some governments have adopted some of these practices as part of a "reinventing" government strategy, although many citizens are still cynical and skeptical about the motives and results of these efforts (Berman, 1997). The level of customer service provided by government agencies may not have deteriorated as much as some suggest: rather improvements in government customer service may have lagged behind those made by business in the 1990s. Nonetheless, more citizens have grown increasingly less tolerant of inefficiency, mismanagement, and lack of responsiveness in the public sector. They favor political candidates who advocate applying business "know-how" to more efficiently deliver government services.

Citizen expectations about the quality of service provided by public organizations are likely to rise even higher in the future. The challenge for public managers is to measure "gaps" in performance between expectations and perceptions of the service level provided by their agencies. Public managers must identify and fill these gaps, set performance standards to satisfy various users of services, and work with elected officials to balance the preferences of widely different individuals and groups, many of who now expect government to be run like a business.

### **APPLYING CUSTOMER SERVICE STANDARDS TO GOVERNMENT**

Compared to profit-driven private businesses, governments are more challenged to balance conflicting interests, set performance standards and motivate employees to respond to citizens as "valued customers". The struggle to provide customer-responsive government service often conflicts with other public priorities and vested interests. Advocates for more emphasis on customer service in government must convince appointed officials (experts) and elected representatives (politicians) as well as compete with others (private interests) who are more interested in consolidation, devolution, lower taxes, higher productivity, less government, incentive pay, reduced budgets, termination, or privatization. Nevertheless, many public agencies are trying -- with mixed results -- to change their image (of unresponsiveness) by applying various customer service and quality improvement strategies to a wide range of public services (Beam, 2001; Berman, West, and Milakovich, 1994; Carr, et. al., 1999; Hunt, 1994; Keohler and Pankowski, 1996; Milakovich, 1995; Osborne and Plastrik, 2000). Most government agencies are small service organizations fully capable of responding to citizens as customers; political leadership is necessary to change the diverse relationship between divergent interests, redesign management systems, and focus on quality improvement (Rago, 1994; Sensenbrenner, 1991). Strategies for managing quality and improving service are well known, state governments have identified "customer service training" as one of their highest priorities, and many governments now have specific guidelines for implementing customer service programs (Beam; 2001; Brudney, Hebert and Wright, 1999; Milakovich, 1990; Osborne and Plastrik, 2000). Empirical case studies to guide organizational change strategies are lacking in many service industries, especially public agencies; and in some instances, broader citizenship interests and the need for political accountability may conflict with the demands and expectations individual recipients of services (Behn, 1999; Carroll, 1995; deLeon and Denhardt, 2000; Kettl, 1998; Swiss, 1992; Wilson and Durant, 1994).

Unlike government, businesses must pay close attention to customers because of ever-present competition from other providers who offer the same product or service faster and cheaper. As customer expectations rise, private firms must respond with better service at lower prices or fall behind the competition: for many, increasing customer satisfaction, getting new customers and retaining the old ones is a life or death struggle. Loss of revenue and reputation accompanying failure to satisfy customers is a major driving force for internal systems improvement as well as resource allocation. Because they are forced to offer goods and services at competitive prices in open markets, most private firms also have a more straightforward relationship with customers and gain financially from serving greater numbers of customers more efficiently. Typically, customers pay market price for a product or service and do not conflict with each other over what services should be offered. Although businesses express concerns about customer retention and satisfaction, exchanges between providers and consumers are often limited to a one-time sales transaction and the legal and (perhaps) ethical obligation to fulfill any warranty claims that might arise after the sale.

Governments also procure billions of dollars worth of goods and provide services, but they do not respond to the same market constraints as private businesses. Consequently, most public agencies do not gain financially from providing better service to customers. The opposite is usually true: budgets are usually determined a year in advance of expenditures, so more customers may mean fewer resources available to spend on those being served. Public school budgets, for instance, are passed by state legislatures and, despite the best efforts to predict enrollments; many districts in fast-growing geographic areas are under-funded when the actual number of students exceeds estimates. Improving customer service in the public sector is also constrained by: 1) conflicting ideological (political) conflicts about the purposes of government; 2) private interest group competition for limited public resources; 3) difficulties in setting and enforcing service standards; and 4) resistance to developing measures of outcomes, performance, and results. Fragmented distribution networks, multiple overlapping services, political pressures, and conflicting community values also affect relationships with various types of citizens (i.e. clients, customers, taxpayers, recipients, voters, or users). Unlike their counterparts in the private sector, governments must also be more concerned with equity and fairness of resource distribution as well as efficiency and effectiveness in utilizing resources.

Most mid- and upper-level public managers are familiar with the quality movement in government and are eager to learn how to respond more effectively to customer demands, within pre-existent limits set by law, policy, and regulation. The goals and purposes of some public organizations often reflect divisive relationships with customers and create customer service issues that are inherently more contentious and complex. Although the inherent complexity and legal constraints on customer-supplier relationships may slow the pace of change in the public sector, senior managers in most jurisdictions have the authority to initiate new administrative practices to better serve customers. At the same time, removing cultural, organizational, psychological, and political barriers that inhibit the focus on customer service can be very challenging for public managers.

Barriers to the acceptance of customer responsive government include: 1) resistance to change and adherence to hierarchical rule-driven management systems instead of “networked” customer-focused work cultures; 2) inexperience with output or results

measures for allocating resources; 3) lack of incentives to reward performance; 4) fear of the political consequences of not meeting customer standards; 5) failure of elected and appointed officials to cooperate; and 6) divided accountability for achieving results, especially in regulatory compliance agencies (Milakovich, 1998). Rather than encouraging employees to serve customers within a networked bottom-up customer-responsive management structure, many agencies are still unable (or unwilling) to abandon traditional management systems that emphasize top-down command and control for all demands, processes and systems. Consequently, there is often more talk about improving customer service in government than there are actual efforts to apply quality improvement methods and theories to change the focus of public sector employees and managers (Zbaracki, 1998).

Despite these attitudinal barriers, many public employees and their professional associations are experimenting with management practices aimed at responding to citizens as customers. Substantial progress has been made, yet many important questions remain: Are private sector models, methods and service standards applicable to the public sector? If so, which of the many available approaches deliver the best results to varied recipients of government services? Should there be more recognition in the form of awards, accreditation or charter "marks" for government agencies that excel in their service quality initiatives? Why aren't more public agencies using benchmarking or applying quality audit standards such as ISO 9000-14000 to meet customer standards and empower employees? What new roles should elected officials play in guiding the change process and resolving disputes among administrators and citizens? These questions are more difficult to answer because of the complexity of customer-supplier relationships in the public sector.

### **POLITICS, ADMINISTRATION, AND CUSTOMER SERVICE**

Conflicting citizen demands and expectations make public administration fundamentally different and, in many ways, more challenging than private management. Governments attempt to meet a wide range of citizen demands and expectations with limited resources provided from a variety of sources. The primary customers of most public agencies are their political sponsors: elected representatives serving on local boards and commissions, members of legislatures, and the U.S. Congress. Government agencies also provide a variety of services to recipients or users who expect courtesy, empathy, fair treatment, and responsiveness. At other times, their customers may be suppliers who want to develop an efficient, effective (and profitable) business relationship; they may be overseers who want accountability; or simply concerned taxpayers seeking the most efficient use of "their" resources. Sometimes they are adversaries who have diametrically opposed views of how to allocate public resources. Still others are involuntary regulatees who must comply with government regulators or suffer civil fines or criminal penalties. Unlike most businesses, governments must sometimes form partnerships with customers who may be recipients as well as producers of services. For instance, a physician could be a taxpayer, recipient of services, political activist, as well as a frontline manager for the Medicare program. Such partnerships are likely to increase in the future, reinforcing the need for better coordination among widely varied customers.

Most public agencies do not select their customers and must serve those who are either can not or will not purchase services from a private provider; others are natural monopolies that offer services to particular groups in confined geographic districts without competition. In many instances, governments must negotiate expectations with customers as direct service providers or co-producers, and then seek to meet co-determined standards. Forming this type of “uncooperative partnership” is far more challenging than dealing with a customer who has a choice of suppliers and pays market price for a good or service in a commercial transaction.

There are legal obligations, as well, which restrict the range of discretionary actions that public agencies can take to satisfy customers and blur lines of political control and accountability. There is always the danger that government officials may do “too much” to please their customers. The National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) criticized the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO), one of the most respected agencies in the federal government, for “over responding” to its primary customer, the U.S. Congress, and losing its traditional role as impartial and objective evaluator of federal programs (Pegnato, 1997). Other federal agencies, including the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and U.S. Customs have been criticized for lax procedures, poor record-keeping, and interpretations that allow individual officers either too much discretion in applying administrative rules or making decisions without due process or judicial review. Several federal intelligence agencies (CIA, NSA, and FBI) have been under scrutiny for their handling of sensitive information regarding known terrorist threats prior to the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on the World Trade Center in New York.

Following the path initially defined by private-sector reformers and endorsed by public sector unions, the federal government stressed customer service as a cornerstone of its reinvention efforts since the mid-1990s. Despite criticisms that the effort was theoretically flawed and implementation uneven in some agencies (Carroll, 1995; Thompson, 2000), there is now an established national strategy for applying customer service quality principles to improve the operations of all types of government agencies. As a result, there are now clearer models and strategies to guide appointed and elected officials at all levels of government in their new customer service roles and responsibilities.

## **REINVENTING CUSTOMER SERVICE**

The most recent attempt to reform the federal government began in 1993 with the National Performance Review (NPR). This reform effort lasted until January 2001, and was the longest and by most accounts the most successful of ten such attempts during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Arnold, 1995; Kettl, 1998). Whether in the name of efficiency or political expediency, nearly every president in the past 120 years has attempted to reform the bureaucracy.

For most of our early history, expectations for improved government performance were minimal as there was no distinction between politics and administration. Indeed, politics was administration and vice versa. There was little concern with government “performance” because all jobs were filled by patronage for the loyal campaign workers and followers of successful politicians. Following the assassination of President Garfield

by a demented individual rejected for federal government service, Congress passed the Pendleton Act in 1883. This created the Federal Civil Service System and attempted to insulate administrative decision making from political influences. The Act provided for a neutral public administration and sought to increase government productivity by raising the competence levels of in U.S. government employees. The Brownlow Committee (1937) and the Reorganization Act of 1939 committed the Federal Government to efficiency, economy, reduction in the number of separate agencies and in staffing, and elimination of duplication between agencies. The first and second Hoover Commissions in the 1950s recommended the establishment of a senior executive service (SES), a reform that was not accomplished until 1979. Some state and a few local governments followed the federal government's lead. In 1982, the Reagan Administration's Grace Commission offered over 400 specific recommendations for increasing the efficiency of federal government operations. Many of the most controversial recommendations, including closing obsolete military bases, also took many years to achieve.

The NPR (1993-2001) challenged federal agencies to cut red tape, downsize, deregulate, and provide customer service equal to "the best in business". Inspired by the best-selling book *Reinventing Government* (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992), the NPR was a controversial mix of theory and ideology that focuses on "market-driven" solutions to the perceived inefficiencies in the delivery of government services. Specific, and often contradictory, recommendations included putting customers first, decentralizing decisions, empowering front-line employees, reducing administrative costs and focusing on results.

The NPR was a high level federal initiative endorsed by former president Clinton and vice-president Albert Gore, who personally led the initial six-month review of all federal government agencies, identified targets for waste reduction, and opportunities for management improvement (Gore, 1995). Since its inception, the NPR has managed to avoid extreme politicization and has received generally positive outside evaluations for achieving most of its major goals (Kettl, 1998). By late 1998, Congress had enacted and the President had signed 83 laws incorporating NPR recommendations. The "reinventors" claim to have implemented two-thirds of the original 1993 recommendations by eliminating 250 outdated government programs and 16,000 pages of regulation; cutting more than 640,000 pages of internal rules; reducing the federal budget by more than \$137 billion; establishing nearly 4,000 customer service standards in 570 federal organizations or programs; giving out more than 1200 "Hammer Awards" to teams of federal employees responsible for \$37 billion in cost savings; creating more than 350 "reinvention laboratories" to stimulate innovation, improve performance and eliminate unnecessary regulations (Thompson, 2000); and downsizing the federal civilian workforce by 13% -- more than 317,000 employees. These reforms have resulted in the smallest federal government, on a percentage basis, since the 1960s.<sup>1</sup>

The name of the NPR was changed to the National Partnership for Reinventing Government in 1997 and the effort was given a new slogan --"America@Its Best"-- which reads like a web site address to emphasize the commitment to greater public access through the expanded use of information technology and the internet. New technology is also being used to gather public comments on goals, to communicate directly with citizens, and to distribute reports from high impact agencies on their progress towards reaching goals. To establish stronger ties with other governmental

reforms such as the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA), high impact agencies must publish their customer service standards, performance goals, specific measures, and results on GPRA web site (<http://www.opm.gov/gpra/index.htm>).<sup>2</sup>

One of the NPR key strategies was the establishment of standards for improved customer service. After an intense review by the NPR staff, former President Clinton issued Executive Order 12862 "Setting Customer Standards," mandating all federal agencies to identify their customers, find out what they want, and develop customer service standards to measure agency performance. Federal executive agencies published customer service standards in September 1995 and since then, individual agencies have established specific performance indicators. The standards were derived from customer surveys, data analysis, employee input, feedback from customers, and publication of standards so both customers and suppliers are aware of mutual expectations. Although these standards have generated visible baseline data on relative agency performance, it is still too early to determine the level of commitment among federal agencies or the long-term impact of these changes on the federal bureaucracy. The Bush Administration is reviewing many of the NPR initiatives and the momentum for reforms has stalled in the Republican dominated 108<sup>th</sup> Congress. It is likely to take another few elections cycles to determine whether this movement represents a passing trend or a fundamental shift in the administrative values of the United States Government (Milakovich and Gordon, 2001: 36).

The trend toward customer-focused, decentralized, flexible, performance-based, and results-driven government is accelerating worldwide as more attention is being paid to recommendations for change and to success stories from an expanding numbers of public agencies. Future plans call for a "globalization" of the reinvention effort with heavy emphasis on technology as well as citizen access to and participation in public decision-making.<sup>3</sup> Lessons from other countries may be applicable in the United States as well, as many foreign governments have gone even farther in implementing customer-oriented changes. These include the expanded use of "citizen's charters" that guarantee specific levels of service, quality "marks" which recognize agencies for exemplary service, "secret shopper" programs that use public employees to evaluate levels of service in other agencies, and the publication of complaint procedures to be followed by citizens when agencies do not meet the service standards that are set.

The basic idea of setting customer service standards has been applied for the past two decades in some form in nearly 20 countries including Australia, Belgium, Canada, Finland, France, India, Ireland, Italy, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Singapore, Sweden, as well as in a few governments in the United States. In the United Kingdom, there are over 200 national charters and an estimated 10,000 local charters, all designed to provide better services for citizens. The U.K. national charter program began in 1991 and was renamed Service First- The New Charter Programme by the Labour Administration in 1998. Nine principles underlie the New Charter Programme for every public service:

- Set published standards of service
- Be open and provide full information about costs and performance
- Consult and involve present and potential users
- Encourage access and promotion of choice

- Treat all people fairly; respect their privacy and dignity; be helpful and friendly
- Pay particular attention to those with special needs
- Put things right when they go wrong
- Use resources effectively to provide the best value for taxpayers and users
- Innovate and improve service and facilities
- Work with other providers

For a detailed and indexed guide to the use of charters, citizen participation, performance standards, charter mark awards, networks, best practices, and how to complain in the U.K., see the excellent Modernizing Public Services Group website at: <http://www.servicefirst.gov.uk/>

### **IMPROVING U.S. PUBLIC SERVICE QUALITY**

There have been several well-publicized efforts to apply customer-driven quality theories in U.S. federal agencies, notably the Department of Agriculture, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the U.S. Mint, the Social Security Administration (SSA), and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Nonetheless, unflattering comparisons are still made about the lower standards of service offered by the public sector. According to one cynical observer, the stereotype that many citizens still have of government service is: “we want you unless we have to be creative or courteous or better than adequate. In that case get lost!” (quoted in Marini, 1993: 170) Although this is an obvious over-statement about customer service, public impatience with perceived mistreatment by public managers is growing. Distrust was further reflected by 30-year lows in public opinion regarding faith in government prior to 9/11/01, anti-tax movements, and local government incorporation efforts. Recipients of government services are often frustrated with citations, studies, reports, plans, and buck-passing bureaucratic delays that too often accompany citizen-government encounters (McClendon, 1992). Cynicism and skepticism resulting in distrust of public and non-profit officials are also partially explained by high-level scandals, official misconduct, and mismanagement of trust funds (Herzlinger, 1996). Rebuilding faith and trust in government as well as improving the management capacity and competence of career civil servants have been prominent themes of recent reform efforts.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the anti-government rhetoric, not all bureaucrats are rude nor are all government programs inefficient or ineffective. On the contrary, most citizens are satisfied with the majority of government programs they receive (Goodsell, 1994; Neiman, 2000) and many federal agencies receive higher customer service quality ratings than private companies.<sup>5</sup> Increasing numbers of federal departments are realizing the importance of customer satisfaction, and taking positive actions to decentralize decision-making, empower employees, achieve measurable improvements in systems and processes, and respond to citizens as customers. Many national governmental functions (and agencies responsible for them), emergency management (FEMA), environmental protection (EPA), federal tax collection (IRS), procurement (General Services Administration) and social security administration (SSA) have shown dramatic improvements in customer service during the past decade.<sup>6</sup> Others, such as air traffic



control and airport security (FAA), immigration and naturalization (INS), and environmental clean-up “Superfund” management (EPA) have been less successful.

Not surprisingly, some reform initiatives resulted from crisis situations and special investigations rather than the recommendations of the NPR. Changes in the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), for example, were prompted by the need for an “image overhaul” after years of harsh enforcement actions, statistical quotas to gain compliance, and scare tactics by IRS agents.<sup>7</sup> Auditors noted (somewhat paradoxically) that collection statistics and strict enforcement actions were needed to ensure that all taxpayers would obey the law, but quality and customer service should not be compromised. National Treasury Employees Union President Robert Tobias praised IRS’s new management focus and said “improved customer service will surely increase voluntary compliance among taxpayers” (Friel, 1997). One positive result of these changes has been that the IRS has officially shifted its mission from strict regulatory compliance and enforcement to customer service and taxpayer assistance.

In addition to extensive federal reform efforts, many states and local governments are de-layering traditional bureaucratic hierarchies, empowering employees, and redesigning performance management systems to provide better service to citizen/customers (Berman, West, and Milakovich, 1994; Brudney, Herbert, and Wright, 1999; Hunt, 1994; Milakovich, 1998). Recognition and award programs are used to reward quality improvement efforts and acknowledge employees for exemplary customer service. Although it is sometimes difficult to define who the customers of public organizations are and how to satisfy their needs, quality awards can demonstrate how governments in specific service areas are better serving customers. Quality awards can be used to reinforce these goals, reward success, and provide objective benchmarks to help guide the transition to a customer-focused government.<sup>8</sup>

One of the greatest challenges for governments continues to be the identification of objective information upon which decisions can be based. In order to sustain a customer service quality improvement strategy it is necessary to periodically update or reinforce the core values that are the backbone of the effort. Awards, benchmarks, and certificates help to motivate employees and can serve as internal self-assessment tools for updating or refining initiatives. An outsider’s unbiased view can help identify a type of customer who may be neglected, a process that is failing, or purpose that is not being fulfilled. Furthermore, applying for an award or quality certificate such as the International Organization for Standards (ISO) 9000 series can help reinforce core values and provide the framework to make necessary management changes (Lowery, 1998). An annual strategic review can be a valuable learning experience to sustain a high-performance results-driven organization.

Quality awards and accreditation standards will not eliminate all the distinctions between the public and private sector in resolving complex issues such as defining customer needs, motivating employees, or articulating organizational mission. They do, however, provide a rich database for helping governments define their main purposes and reach out to all citizens who are recipients of public services. The competitive challenge and distinction that accompany the pursuit of an award or ISO 9000 certification can be a source of employee motivation and pride. Applying for an award enhances in-house customer service quality initiatives, helps identify areas that need improvement, and motivates everyone to achieve specific goals. Perhaps most

importantly, the data generated by the application process can help in the development of theory to assist public managers in determining which private sector models are best suited for application in the public sector.

## LESSONS FROM THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Two decades ago, U.S. industry faced the grim prospect of greater international competition, lower profits, and shrinking global market share. Business leaders responded by “reinventing” the internal work environments of their corporations. They rediscovered the importance of customers -- both internal and external -- and began “empowering” employees with the authority, training, and trust needed to serve customers when they need attention. Even the most disciplined firms, however, found that demand for better customer service often exceeded the management capacity of the firm or motivation of employees to consistently “meet or exceed” customer expectations. Although many firms embraced the new “quality paradigm”, they underestimated the discipline, time and training effort required to change management procedures and empower employees. As the quality circle expanded, more companies responded by relearning how to simultaneously be more competitive, quality-focused and customer-driven.

The 1990s witnessed a profound restructuring of many basic productive enterprises, first in manufacturing and later in service industries, resulting in downsizing, acquisitions, and mergers of companies within the United States and abroad. At the same time, a more aggressive movement emerged, urging the application of radical change to “reengineer” corporations (Hammer and Champy, 1993). Many large multinational firms quite literally reengineered themselves from the inside out using various quality improvement theories and strategies. The expanded use of the Internet, World Wide Web, and electronic commerce has only accelerated these trends. Leading private sector firms mandated that their suppliers demonstrate commitment to customer service by meeting higher quality standards and showing enhanced responsiveness to customer requirements. Many firms literally were broken-up into smaller, more manageable, decentralized service units to establish closer work relationships with customers and suppliers. Given the sheer size and scope of the effort, mistakes were inevitable.

Scores of federal, state and local governments have implemented quality management programs designed to reduce costs and improve customer service. In some instances, theories of quality improvement such as Business Process Reengineering (BPR), Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI), and Total Quality Management (TQM) were misunderstood and misapplied in both the public and private sectors (Hackman and Wegman, 1995). Unrealistic expectations, employee resistance, and controversial “quality bureaucracies” were created in many public and private organizations. For these reasons, a “TQM-backlash” has fostered cynicism and dampened enthusiasm for further non-manufacturing applications. These reforms are hampered in the public sector by 1) perceived negative experiences; 2) the long-term time frames of many TQM programs; 3) rigid management structures; and 4) a lack of theory-driven research on how to empower, motivate and reward public employees for customer service quality. Although TQM has been the official management philosophy of the U.S. government since 1987, the public sector still faces serious managerial challenges to

genuinely motivate, empower and reward employees (Behn, 1995). Critical elements in successful customer service quality initiatives are employee commitment, responsiveness to customers, and top management support.

## **EMPOWER PUBLIC EMPLOYEES**

Teaching employees to think differently about customers, managers, suppliers, and themselves is critical to the success of any organizational change effort. Why haven't more governments used customer relationship management (CRM) strategies to motivate and empower employees? Motivating employees to improve customer service results from 1) a sense of common purpose; 2) the desire to succeed resulting from employee empowerment; 3) training for new methods of responding to customers; and 4) the need for reward and recognition. Individuals within an organization develop a shared sense of common purpose by respecting the rights of customers and making their satisfaction a primary goal of the organization. Empowerment is the devolution of authority and freedom to do what is necessary within pre-established limits to satisfy customers (Block, 1991). Empowerment gives front-line employees with the motivation to change a voice in decision-making, a stake in the success of the organization, tangible rewards, training opportunities, and process-ownership. Rewards may be used to change employee behavior: they can be intrinsic in the form of peer recognition and better working conditions, or they can be extrinsic with bonuses, charter marks, incentives or recognition by competitive quality awards. Regardless of the form of the reward, empowered public employees, managers, and elected officials in a quality managed environment share the common goal of providing the best services to all those they serve.

For employees to internalize and implement quality management principles, empowerment must be adopted as a state of mind or attitude shared by all members of the organization rather than a set of rigid rules, policies, procedures or practices. Improving customer service begins with one-to-one relationships between people, not with laws, rules, structures or systems. Training and education programs that teach front-line servers values, not just rules, are vital for improving individual judgement and overall customer satisfaction (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991; Milakovich, 1995). All empowered employees must be fully trained and results of their work (at least initially) must be carefully monitored. Such a change in the collective mindset of an organization requires delegating authority and responsibility to those who are in direct contact with recipients of the services.

Accountable and empowered front-line employees with specialized knowledge and expertise are trained to operate without close supervision. To achieve this, managers must carefully select those who occupy front-line positions, provide them with a strong organizational foundation and culture in which to work, offer them strategic guidance, and give them the support necessary to perform their jobs. Empowered employees are more likely to respond to customers' demands in the same manner that management responds to their own needs. Empowered front-line employees can then be granted the authority to make decisions within prescribed limits at the point of customer contact. Focusing on customer service encourages public employees to become more

accountable to those they serve as well as to their bosses in the organizational hierarchy. This transformation in thinking can be very challenging for some public service organizations, especially for managers of regulatory agencies (e.g. intelligence, law enforcement, tax collection, and building and zoning code enforcement) who believe they are exempt because of the evaluative and regulatory judgments that they exercise over their “customers”.

Some public sector managers are reluctant to empower employees to resolve customer service issues at the point they occur; others inadvertently exacerbate problems by not fully utilizing the capabilities of those they employ. Many control-oriented managers believe that “thinking employees” threaten their power and make detailed rules to replace employee judgement with their own. Managers should trust employees and not “squelch talent” by applying rigid rulebook management. One reason rule-driven management is so pervasive (in both the public and private sectors) is that many managers still believe it is essential to standardize service among different employees and service units (Barry and Parasuraman, 1991). This translates into the type of universally despised “bureaucratic impersonality” that is found more often in the public sector because of its tradition of formal Weberian organizational structure. Excessive dependence on impersonal and inflexible rules contradicts the entire concept of employee empowerment.

Bureaucratic delays, excuses for inaction, and unnecessary transfers between departments fail to utilize the advantages that empowerment and decentralization contribute to improving customer service and satisfaction. The fastest and most immediate way to solve a customer's problem is to do so instantly at the point of initial contact, rather than waiting for approval from higher management. Instead of thick rulebooks, a strong, well-defined vision reflecting organizational values should guide employee behavior. Rule-driven bureaucracies tend to produce regimented “by-the-book” responses when more flexible “by-the-customer” decisions are needed instead. Changing the control-oriented managerial mindset, developing trust relationships, and balancing service delivery and regulatory enforcement responsibilities are among the challenges facing those who see the potential value in customer-focused government (Nyhan, 2000; McClendon, 1996). With the proper training, empowered employees know their limits of authority, can be held accountable when they exceed that authority, and know when to delegate decisions to someone else.

## **RESPOND TO CITIZENS AS VALUED CUSTOMERS**

In addition to redefining the different needs of various types of customers, empowered employees must realize the importance of responding promptly when conflicts occur. Public officials must understand that most customer demands, like constituent casework, require the intervention of empowered front-line employees with specialized knowledge and expertise. Responsiveness, together with reliability, assurance, empathy, and tangible outcomes, is one of the principle dimensions that can be used to judge an organization's customer service quality (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry, 1990). The first step in developing a successful customer-service strategy is identifying various existing and potential customers in the public marketplace (McClendon, 1992). Organizations that systematically define who their customers are, what they want, and how expectations can be met, increase the probability of success by more precisely

targeting limited organizational resources. To successfully respond to customer problems at the point-of-contact, problem resolution and secondary recovery techniques (procedures to correct errors after they have occurred) must be taught to all employees, not just to managers. An effective customer service system rewards employees for quality service; management is responsible for designing and maintaining that system. One technique being used in a few local governments to allocate rewards and make employees aware of the consequences on not responding to customers is the "secret shopper" program. Employees from different divisions volunteer to act as citizens seeking a public service from another agency. The quality of service is evaluated and opportunities for internal process improvement are identified.

As public service organizations become more customer-driven, governments will respond to citizens as recipients who want issues resolved quickly without unnecessary bureaucratic delay or unreasonable excuses for inaction. (How much delay is "necessary" and which excuses are "reasonable" can be analyzed by agencies with customer input to establish performance standards.) Customer satisfaction and administrative responsiveness can and should be the ultimate objectives of these efforts, not simply bureaucratic efficiency or political expediency. Governments can adopt a "marketing" orientation, in the sense that each person in the organization can be trained to empathize with a customer and help resolve the problem--no matter how trivial or openly hostile the question (Coffman, 1986). When disputes occur, most people need a reassuring statement from a public official that he/she is aware of the problem and trying to resolve it as soon as possible. Unfortunately, public agencies are often so consumed with bureaucratic accountability and control that the emotional support needs of citizens are often neglected. This results in part from the top-down command and control type of management structure more commonly found in rules-driven (rather than results-driven) public bureaucracies.

Traditional public administration practice, crisis management, and historical patterns of governmental accountability favor top-down management and are used to justify not deploying a customer service focus where government workers identify and respond directly to citizens' needs and management expedites the process. Balancing these top-down and bottom-up pressures is viewed by some as a problem in public agencies (Kettl, 1998). Most elected officials prefer to delegate authority to agencies that implement rules from the top. At the same time, they realize that rigid command and control systems stifle individual service, restrict flexibility, and impede immediate responsiveness to customers. The networked customer service approach of granting bottom-up, instead of top-down, accountability encourages entrepreneurship by modifying the traditional relationship between citizens, managers, suppliers, and elected officials (Sarbaugh-Thompson, 1998). Within pre-determined limits for almost all routine decisions, front-line workers assume the authority to resolve the problem and accept the accountability for the results of the decision. Extensive training is provided to teach line employees to distinguish between routine situations and those that require a special response. Public managers have to balance the two potentially conflicting perspectives: the traditional top-down legal-rational approach and the empowered bottom-up process likely to lead to greater satisfaction for recipients. Without comprehensive employee training, shifting to the bottom-up networked approach too quickly could pose a challenge to the rule of law and administrative regulation upon which American government is based. Conversely, not focusing on customer needs

within a reasonable timeframe increases frustration levels and inhibits accountability, empowerment, and responsiveness.

## **CHANGING ROLES OF ELECTED OFFICIALS**

Unlike the private sector, public agencies must be concerned with a broader set of non-economic policy demands for equality, equity, and fairness in the distribution of resources. As legitimate spokespersons for their constituents, elected representatives will always be involved in resolving disputes between government officials and individuals who feel they have been treated unfairly by public employees. Many local elected officials are eager to perform this “electoral activist” role as representatives and spokespersons for those who elected them (Svara, 1999). Politicians who try to “selectively” influence individual transactions between frontline workers and citizens, however, make it more difficult for managers to improve an organization’s overall customer service (Box, 1999; Pagnato, 1997). Without point-of-contact accountability granted to public employees, elected officials who play the ombudsman role may also find themselves squeezed between the top-down perspective (citizens as voters) and bottom-up pressures (citizens as customers). Satisfying the needs of these very different constituents’ interests could conflict with other public policy goals. Elected officials must be involved as co-partners and mediators with public employees and managers to encourage citizen participation in efforts to improve the level of customer service. With proper theory to guide decisions, there is nothing inherently inconsistent about maintaining political accountability, resolving disputes among varied interests, and improving customer service.

For accountability purposes, resolving customer service disputes may require the occasional intervention of elected officials, whose budgetary and policy decisions already provide most of operating revenue and strategic goals for public managers. As the leaders of public service organizations, elected officials will play a more active role as co-equal partners in re-designing processes to accommodate citizen demands for improved service quality. If citizens do not trust public officials, they will become cynical and suspicious of government and withhold participation. Citizens, however, are neither elected representatives nor experts in the technical functions of governments. Therefore, they must listen to public managers and other experts to understand the complexity of situations and problems from the perspectives of career personnel (Beam, 2001: 247). Citizens can advance public policy goals and restore civic governance by participating in government activities that affect their interests. Conversely, public managers can enhance closer administrative, citizen, and political cooperation by implementing quality management theories. As a result of such efforts, citizens in many governments may now expect a greater range of choices about the types of services available and who will provide those services. This places a burden on public managers to select from among the available alternatives those that best respond to citizen preferences.

In many public school districts, for example, academies, charter schools, and magnet programs are being used to promote parental choice, local control, student achievement, and diversity. Students with special competencies, needs and talents are no longer confined to a one-size-fits-all education delivered within the borders of their residential district. Similarly, corporations have adapted to the new Internet-driven world of

electronic commerce by realizing that they no longer own their customers. Likewise, governments in customer-focused, “borderless” and technology-driven public agencies must recognize that they don’t control their citizens. Commitment to enhanced customer service builds confidence, encourages participation in decision-making, and reinforces democratic political values such as accountability, community control, decentralization, equal access to information, and open government.

## **TOWARD POINT-OF-CONTACT ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR**

Government agencies receive much of their operating revenue (and most of their criticism) from a wide variety of sources. Disagreement over appropriations, budgets and priorities reflect the diversity of interests among those being served as citizens, customers, clients, constituents, recipients, or suppliers. These diverse “customers” often differ with each other as well as their elected representatives on how policies should be implemented and how tax dollars should be spent. The presence of competing interests creates a problem to be resolved by elected and appointed officials -- not a barrier to implementation-- when defining customer expectations and closing gaps between expectations, perceptions, and performance.

Although most public agencies receive much of their operating revenues from representative legislative bodies, such as cities, counties, states, other governments and special districts within designated jurisdictions, many state and local governments increasingly draw funds from proprietary services, designated trust funds, or fees collected directly from recipients. These funds are restricted to specific services such as airport operations, cable television, utility franchises, water and sewer, or solid waste disposal. Turnpike tolls, for example, can only be used for the construction and maintenance of highways. The proprietary fee-based and intergovernmental shares of the operating budgets of many large state and local governments now exceed the amount collected from general revenue sources. Simply put, local governments are literally closer to the people and must treat citizens as customers, especially when fines, license fees, service charges, and tolls are paid directly by service recipients and "earmarked" for the operation of specific public purposes.

Whatever the source of revenue or the nature of the relationship between citizen, manager, and elected official, everyone should at least agree with the goal that public agencies must provide the best quality service at the lowest costs. Especially since increasing numbers of citizens now pay governments’ bills directly (as fees, service charges and tolls) they want accountable, efficient, fair, and effective value for their scarce resources. Teaching managers and front-line employees how to apply techniques to narrow the “gaps” between perceptions and expectations of service quality (Zeithmal, Parsuraman and Berry, 1990) is an important step toward establishing customer-focused accountability and responsiveness. Empowering employees to apply those techniques at critical points in service transactions improves both customer responsiveness and utilization of resources (See Guidelines in Table 1 below).

Table 1: Guidelines for Improving Customer Service

1. *Empower employees to respond to customer concerns as they occur*
2. *Conduct surveys to evaluate the level of service expected by citizens*
3. *Prioritize customer expectations and establish performance standards*
4. *Analyze the difference between expectations and perceptions of service*
5. *Recognize that regulatory services present unique measurement problems*
6. *If necessary, separate regulatory from distributive and redistributive services*
7. *Develop a typology to apply customer service measures in agencies on the basis of function and impact*
8. *Define specific guidelines for responding to citizens in both conflict and routine situations*

Regardless of the type of transaction, both citizen and manager benefit from the knowledge gained by objective customer surveys that evaluate the level of service expected and provided by different agencies. Despite the general absence of networked internal processes responsive to customer demands, managers must assume the difficult (and politically sensitive) task of balancing and prioritizing widely different preferences among diverse individuals and groups who expect higher levels of service. Absent the private incentive to bolster the "bottom line", empowered public managers must identify customer expectations and establish performance standards that satisfy multiple users of services. Adjustments can and should be made for the nature of the service provided by government: for example, customer service principles are inherently more difficult to apply to some aspects of policing, building and zoning code enforcement, corrections, environmental protection, and tax collection. Satisfactory customer service outcomes are less likely to be achieved when services are mandatory, paid for indirectly, and involuntary. (For instance, paying a stiff fine and court costs for a traffic citation is a fee-based and very involuntary transaction that most citizens would prefer not to have in the first place.) In other instances, when services are distributive, voluntary and fee-for-service based, managers and politicians have fewer reasons not to apply a networked customer service model because citizens are paying for the service directly, satisfaction is (relatively) easier to measure, and results can be used to make adjustments in service delivery processes.

Regulatory compliance and enforcement activities often reflect hostile relationships between citizen and government and should be differentiated from general service delivery issues. In addition, it may be necessary to separate customer measures of non-routine governmental regulatory functions from more routine distributive and redistributive service delivery activities (Lowi, 1964). Developing a typology to guide elected officials and managers in distinguishing policy actions based on function (e.g. education, courts, police, welfare, water and sewer, etc.) and impact (i.e. regulatory, deregulatory, distributive, redistributive) would assist in the difficult task of separating those government activities suitable for application of customer service models from those which are not.<sup>9</sup> Separating regulatory from distributive services permits managers to maintain point-of-contact accountability by defining parameters for responding to citizen demands in conflict situations. Rather than maintaining strict command and control hierarchies for the delivery of all types of services, empowered and trained



public employees can distinguish which responses are appropriate for particular situations.

## CONCLUSIONS

Merely setting standards is no longer enough to ensure citizen satisfaction with public services. Governments must empower employees and reorient management systems to monitor performance that guarantees citizen standards are met. There are success stories to guide the effort. Public agencies have generated tangible performance measures, changed administrative systems to achieve results, and delivered on promises for improved service to their customers.<sup>10</sup> Many federal and state agencies have achieved explicit written customer service standards in specific service arenas. These successes can be used to inform citizens, elected representatives, and public officials in the difficult task of improving performance. In many jurisdictions, the traditional top-down model of public administration is being supplemented by more flexible, networked and customer-responsive strategies. Benchmarking, certification, and quality awards can also be used to compare results, achieve policy goals, highlight successes, and define customer service reorientation efforts (Camp, 1989; Coplin and Dwyer, 2000; Keehley, et al., 1997). There are now hundreds of national, state and local quality awards that are a largely untapped, but increasingly rich, reservoir of detailed information about how various types of organizations can change management practices to effectively respond to customers.<sup>11</sup> Research findings generated by successful applications offer managers a clearer understanding of their customers' needs and how they can change management systems and empower employees to meet them.

Although a great deal of progress has been made since the reinvention era began nearly a decade ago, many governments still need to be encouraged to respond to multiple citizen-customer demands. Private sector methods and techniques may be used, albeit selectively, as they are not easily applied to the 87,000 decentralized, locally-controlled, and fragmented cottage industries of the public sector. There is simply no "one best way" to do things in the United States, and most Americans are staunch supporters of diversity, local government and pluralism. The changes proposed above will doubtless threaten some and make others feel uncomfortable, but they must be undertaken because all those who are accountable for, fund, manage, and receive public services (elected officials, taxpayers, appointed administrators, and recipients) are demanding to be treated as both citizens and customers.

While acknowledging the importance of citizenship, civic governance, and partisanship to maintain democratic values, accountability, equity, and pluralist democracy (Box, 1999; Carroll, 1995; Frederickson, 1996), it is equally important to respect citizens' rights to receive full value for their tax dollars. Public managers can't excuse unacceptable employee behavior, failure to meet service standards, or poor customer service because some citizens fail to participate as actively as others in the partisan aspects of government. Public services (even law enforcement and regulatory compliance actions) can respect customer service standards set by accrediting associations, other governments or by the private sector. If this means drawing from successful cases, methods or techniques of other governments or private providers, then governments should welcome the challenge as well as the opportunity to show how they, too, can meet citizen demands for improved service quality.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Reform efforts focused on partnerships with 29 "high-impact" federal agencies to achieve measurable goals of customer service. These "reinvention impact centers" are federal agencies that employ 1.1 million of 1.8 million civilian employees and have the most contact with the public and businesses, including the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA), and the Social Security Administration (SSA).

<sup>2</sup> For information on the history of the NPR, see its archived website (<http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/npr/index.htm>). Two other comprehensive websites for information on recent reforms are: <http://www.firstgov.gov> and <http://www.planetgov.com>.

<sup>3</sup> The first global conference on reinventing government was held in Washington, DC on January 14-15, 1999 and included high-level representatives from nearly 40 countries. "Strategies for 21st Century Government: A Global Forum on Reinventing Government," brought together officials who understand the relationship between citizen trust, efficient government and economic prosperity and are eager to share ideas and effective practices for making government "work better and cost less." The event stressed the theme that democratic government must be accessible and responsive to citizens and deal with private markets in a flexible and efficient manner.

<sup>4</sup> See for example, the 1999 report on "A Government to Trust and Respect: Rebuilding Citizen-Government Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" released by the National Academy of Public Administration <http://www.napawash.org/napa/index.html>, the 1993 Report of The National Performance Review, archived at <http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/npr/index.htm>, and 1989 Volcker Commission on the Public Service, National Commission on the Public Service, *Leadership for America: Rebuilding the Public Service*. New York: Lexington Books, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> The American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) has been measuring customer satisfaction in the private sector since 1994. Customer satisfaction is becoming a key indicator in the federal government and the ACSI results provide the baseline measurement for each agency. The University of Michigan Business School conducts surveys and twenty-nine "high impact" federal agencies are included in the comparative rankings. For full results, see <http://www.bus.umich.edu/research/nqrc/government.html>.

<sup>6</sup> The U.S. Customs Service has been identified as a model federal reinvention effort for reducing the time required to process inbound airline passengers. The Social Security

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Administration has been recognized for improving the responsiveness of its 800-number information system.

<sup>7</sup> These routine authoritarian administrative practices were exposed during 1997 Senate hearings which subsequently resulted in the appointment of a new Director, the first one without a law enforcement background.

<sup>8</sup> The California Council for Quality and Service, for example, specifically connects quality improvement with customer service <<http://www.ccqs.org/>>.

<sup>9</sup> Technology also provides a bridge to improved customer service and helps in the development of theory to guide managers in their choice of strategies. In the University of Michigan Business School ACSI rankings of customer satisfaction (Note 5 above) taxpayers filing tax returns electronically with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) were much more satisfied (74%) than those filing paper returns in the traditional manner (48%).

<sup>10</sup> For example, the Defense Department projects cost savings of over \$1 billion in travel expenses; Social Security Administration answers 95% of its 800-number calls within five minutes; the Postal Service delivers 92% of its first-class mail within 3 days; the Occupational Health and Safety Administration responds to worker complaints in less than one day; and the Federal Communications Commission is raising millions of dollars by auctioning new radio frequencies.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award website at: <<http://www.quality.nist.gov/>>. For details on the state quality awards see: <<http://www.qualitydigest.com/html/state1.html>> The Kennedy School of Government at Harvard sponsors the annual Innovations in American Government Awards program at: <<http://www.innovations.harvard.edu>>

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