
Assessment and Commentary On Denhardt

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Abstract

Denhardt offers many ideas for thought and reflection. And I agree with the general thrust of his arguments. While the concepts of shared leadership and empowerment, expanded democratic leadership, and "citizen first," are indeed important for the future of public management and public organizations, the advancement of these concepts as acceptable practicing values by public managers is not a new one. Today, from my perspective, the greatest challenge facing public management is DIVERSITY/MULTICULTURALISM.

Before I begin an assessment and commentary on Professor Denhardt's essay, "The Future of Public Administration: Challenges to Democracy, Citizenship and Ethics," let me first capture what I see are his major points. Denhardt insightfully addresses five trends that will confront public managers in the new millennium and articulates "two important directions that public managers will likely take in the future." Summarily, Denhardt identifies these challenges as:

1. An extraordinary explosion of new knowledge and technological innovations,
2. Changing institutional patterns resulting from the emergence of post-industrial economies and structures of governance,
3. The increasing integration and globalization of business, politics, culture, and environmental concerns,
4. Demographic and socio-cultural shifts towards more and more diversity and potential conflicts,

5. An erosion of confidence in traditionally structured institutions to cope with the consequences of challenges.

Under each trend Denhardt discusses at some length what activities and changes are occurring in society.

As a result of these trends, Denhardt envisions dramatic changes in the way public managers will operate. He uses two common and simple everyday phrases to characterize these changes-"inside-out" and "upside-down." The former phrase describes the shift from an "internal focus of management" to one with emphasis on "citizens and citizenship." The latter phrase captures the move from a traditional management-leadership style to one of shared leadership. This type of leadership should make our public bureaucracies more caring, compassionate and creative. Stated more succinctly, what Denhardt envisions is a new role of the public manager/public servant; one that moves outside the public bureaucracy to include the various external community groups.

Denhardt offers many ideas for thought and reflection. And I agree with the general thrust of his arguments. While the concepts of shared leadership and empowerment, expanded democratic leadership, and "citizen first," are indeed important for the future of public management and public organizations, the advancement of these concepts as acceptable practicing values by public managers is not a new one.

These concepts take me back to my years of graduate study in public administration/ political science in the early 1970s when the "New Public Administration" (NPA) era literature generated both considerable debate and controversy. Dwight Waldo's Public Administration in a Time of Turbulence (1971), Frank Marini's Toward a New Public Administration (1971), and Eugene P. Dvorin and Robert Simmons' From Amoral to Human Bureaucracy (1972) were popular volumes. The International City Management Association's professional journal, Public Management (1971), devoted a special issue to the NPA. The Public Administration Review was also a leading outlet for the scholarship of the NPAers in the early 1970s (see, for example, Campbell, 1972; Chitwood, 1974). The concepts used in the literature at the time-social equity, client focus, humane bureaucracy, shared decision making, and representative bureaucracy-are in many ways similar to Denhardt's present arguments.

The NPA scholars were critical of the traditional values in public administration, science (efficiency), rationalism, amorality, and pragmatism, because they were contributing factors to the social inequities of the time. Thus, it seems to me that, to some degree, we have come full circle on the responsiveness of public administration to various groups in society. Then the literature argued for public managers to be more responsive to the powerless, politically alienated, minorities, and the underclass. Public managers were challenged to be more value laden and less value neutral. Yet, interestingly, much of the NPA argument withered away by the late 1970s. Can we expect the same to happen to Denhardt's arguments? Or, are the contemporary conditions prompting Denhardt's trends and challenges different than they were some thirty years ago? In the 1960s and early 1970s, America was confronted with civil unrest and social protests. What forces exist today in society that will compel changes in the behavior of public managers?

Today, from my perspective, the greatest challenge facing public management is DIVERSITY/MULTICULTURALISM. Specifically changes in demographics of this country's minority populations, issues which Denhardt mentions but does not adequately address. Or, put another way, in what way(s) will diversity/multiculturalism affect the provision and delivery of public services? Immigrants, ethnic minorities, and women are increasingly becoming a larger and larger portion of the American population and its workforce. Given this state of affairs, who will be the future public managers? Is the public service academy willing, ready, and able to meet the demands of this new student population? Or will a new paradigm of public service education be required (Sampson, 1995)? How will the political landscape shape decisions regarding the provision and delivery of public services? My colleagues and I have argued elsewhere that diversity poses significant changes for the public sector due, in part, "to the delicate balance between equity, human well-being, and public service policy programming" (Jones, Rice and Mathews, 1994). Harvey L White and I (1996:2) state the importance of diversity in the public sector in the following way:

Diversity has the potential of becoming the most important consideration for public service organizations in the 21st century. However, this consideration is not confined

merely to the workforce. Diversity also includes the production and provision of public services. In other words, it is not just question of knowing who will be the public servant(s). There are other important questions that need equal consideration. Among these are: What populations will be served? What goods and services will be provided? How will these goods and services be produced?

Yet, Denhardt, much like the NPAer's, gives little attention and concern to a set of constraining political factors that may impact the behavior of public managers to adapt to the trends and challenges he puts forth. These factors will also impede the public manager's willingness to respond to diversity/multicultural issues. In some localities there is already a "backlash" to diversity initiatives. In California, a state which traditionally had been at the forefront implementing positive diversity/multicultural initiatives, has now retrenched in this area. Other localities have attempted to impose "English only" language restrictions in the public bureaucracy. How would Denhardt reconcile these events with his argument?

At this point, a question that can be raised is: does majority opinion influence a public manager's behavior or affect whether a policy or practice will be administered broadly or narrowly? Are not public managers affected by these political decisions? Such constraining political factors as public program realignments brought on by policy changes, downsizing, resource limitations, and political ideology will make it more difficult for the "Denhardtism" view of future public managers to operate. Further, I argue that this state of affairs does not bode well for promoting a widespread use and general application of shared leadership, expanded democratic governance, and "citizen first" initiatives on the part of public managers.

The growing diverse and multicultural populations will lead to intense pressures on the public management system and process. Consider the following observations:

1. A truly multicultural society will be more difficult for public managers to manage public service delivery systems.

2. There will be increased competition among minority and ethnic groups for public (and private sector) jobs.
3. Public managers will need to be better prepared to confront conflict between minority and ethnic groups that will result over the provision and delivery of public services and the distribution of administrative power.

Denhardt may be too optimistic or perhaps too scholastic in his view concerning the expected changes of behavior and adaptability of public managers to the new trends and challenges of the future. A few years following the NPA literature, the following question arose: "What ever happened to the New Public Administration?" Hopefully, Denhardt's essay is the beginning of a serious dialogue over future behavior of public managers; not the end. Further, Denhardt's vision of the role of the future public manager contrasts sharply to that of Thomas M. Downs, who recently stepped down as President of AMTRAK. As reported by H. George Frederickson (1998), Downs, while giving a plenary speech at the University of Kansas, was asked to respond to the question of the job description for the government manager in the year 2020. He replied, "who the hell knows. Twenty three [two] is too far to look." Denhardt must be a great visionary who sees the future much better than Downs.

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