

WILEY



The Deadly Sins in Public Administration

Author(s): Peter F. Drucker

Source: *Public Administration Review*, Mar. - Apr., 1980, Vol. 40, No. 2 (Mar. - Apr., 1980), pp. 103-106

Published by: Wiley on behalf of the American Society for Public Administration

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/975619>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Wiley and American Society for Public Administration are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Public Administration Review*

From the Professional Stream

par

CURRENTS and SOUNDINGS

THE DEADLY SINS IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Peter F. Drucker, *Claremont Graduate School*

I

No one can guarantee the performance of a public service program, but we know how to ensure non-performance with absolute certainty. Commit any two of the following common sins of public administration, and non-performance will inevitably follow. Indeed, to commit all six, as many public service agencies do, is quite unnecessary and an exercise in overkill.

(1) The first thing to do to make sure that a program will not have results is to have a lofty objective—"health care," for instance, or "to aid the disadvantaged." Such sentiments belong in the preamble. They explain why a specific program or agency is being initiated rather than what the program or agency is meant to accomplish.¹ To use such statements as "objectives" thus makes sure that no effective work will be done. For work is always specific, always mundane, always focused. Yet without work there is non-performance.

To have a chance at performance, a program needs clear targets, the attainment of which can be measured, appraised, or at least judged. "Health care" is not even a pious intention. Indeed it is, at best, a vague slogan. Even "the best medical care for the sick," the objective of many hospitals in the British National Health Service, is not operational. Rather, it is meaningful to say: "It is our aim to make sure that no patient coming into emergency will go for more than three minutes without being seen by a qualified triage nurse." It is a proper goal to say: "Within three years, our maternity ward is going to be run on a "zero defects" basis, which means that there will be no "surprises" in the delivery room and there will not be one case of post-partum puerperal fever on maternity." Similarly, "Promoting the welfare of the American farmer" is electioneering, while "Installing electricity in at least 25 per cent of America's farms within the next three years"—the first goal of the New Deal's Rural Electrification Administration, which was, perhaps, the most successful public service agency in all our administrative history—was an objective that was specific, measurable, attainable—and attained. It immediately was converted into work, and very shortly thereafter, into performance.

(2) The second strategy guaranteed to produce non-performance is to try to do several things at once. It is to refuse to establish priorities and to stick to them. Splintering of efforts guarantees non-results. Yet without concentration on a priority, efforts will be splintered, and the more massive the program, the more the splintering effects will produce non-performance. By contrast, even poorly conceived programs might have results if priorities are set and efforts concentrated.

It is popular nowadays to blame the failure of so many of the programs of Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty" on shaky theoretical foundations. Whether poorly conceived or not, quite a few of the Headstart schools had significant results; every one of them, without exception, was a school that decided on one overriding priority—having the children learn to read letters and numbers—despite heavy criticism from Washington and from all kinds of dogmatists.

Whether poorly conceived or not, quite a few of the Headstart schools had significant results; every one of them, without exception, was a school that decided on one overriding priority—having the children learn to read letters and numbers. . . .

An even more impressive example is the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) in the thirties. Despite tremendous opposition, the bill establishing the TVA only passed Congress because its backers promised a dozen different and mutually antagonistic constituencies: cheap power, cheap fertilizer, flood control, irrigation, navigation, community development and whatnot. TVA's first administrator, Arthur Morgan, a great engineer, then attempted to live up to these promises and to satisfy every one of his constituencies. The only result was an uncontrollably growing bureaucracy, un-

Peter F. Drucker is Clarke Professor of Social Science and Management at Claremont Graduate School. His sixteenth book, *Managing in Turbulent Times*, will be published by Harper & Row in April 1980.

controllably growing expenditures, and a total lack of any performance. Indeed, the TVA in its early years resembled nothing as much as one of those "messes" which we now attack in Washington. Then President Roosevelt removed Morgan and put in a totally unknown young Wisconsin utilities lawyer, David Lilienthal, who immediately—against all advice from all the "pros"—announced his priority: power production. Within a year, the TVA produced results. Lilienthal, by the way, met no opposition, but was universally acclaimed as a saviour.

(3) The third deadly sin of the public administrator is to believe that "fat is beautiful," despite the obvious fact that mass does not do work; brains and muscles do. In fact, overweight inhibits work, and gross overweight totally immobilizes.

One hears a great deal today about the fallacy of "throwing money at problems," but this is not really what we have been doing. We have been throwing manpower at problems, with Vietnam, perhaps, being the worst example, and it is even worse to overstaff than to overfund. Today's administrators, whether civilian or military, tend to believe that the best way to tackle a problem is to deploy more and more people against it. The one certain result of having more bodies is greater difficulties in logistics, in personnel management, and in communications. Mass increases weight, but not necessarily competence. Competence requires direction, decision, and strategy rather than manpower.

Overstaffing is not only much harder to correct than understaffing, it makes non-performance practically certain. For overstaffing always focuses energies on the inside, on "administration" rather than on "results," on the machinery rather than its purpose. It always leads to meetings and memoranda becoming ends in themselves. It immobilizes behind a facade of furious busyness. Harold Ickes, FDR's Secretary of the Interior and one of the New Deal's most accomplished administrators, always asked: "What is the fewest number of people we need to accomplish this purpose?" It is a long time since anyone in Washington (or in the state governments) has asked that question.

(4) "Don't experiment, be dogmatic" is the next—and the next most common—of the administrator's deadly sins. "Whatever you do, do it on a grand scale at the first try. Otherwise, God forbid, you might learn how to do it differently." In technical or product innovation, we sometimes skip the pilot-plant stage, usually to our sorrow. But at least we build a model and put it through wind tunnel tests. In public service, increasingly we start out with a "position"—that is, with a totally untested theory—and go from it immediately to national, if not international, application. The most blatant example may have been the ultra-scholastic dogmatism with which we rushed into national programs in the "War on Poverty" that were based on totally speculative, totally untried social science theories, and backed by not one shred of empirical evidence.

However, even if the theories on which a program is based are themselves sound, successful application still

demands adaptation, cutting, fitting, trying, balancing. It always demands testing against reality before there is final total commitment. Above all, any new program, no matter how well conceived, will run into the unexpected, whether unexpected "problems" or unexpected "successes." At that point, people are needed who have been through a similar program on a smaller scale, who know whether the unexpected problem is relevant or not, or whether the unexpected success is a fluke or genuine achievement.

Surely one of the main reasons for the success of so many of the New Deal programs was that there had been "small scale" experiments in states and cities earlier—in Wisconsin, for instance, in New York State or in New York City, or in one of the reform administrations in Chicago. The outstanding administrators of the New Deal programs—Frances Perkins at Labor, Harold Ickes at Interior, or Arthur Altmeyer at Social Security—were all alumnae of such earlier small-scale experiments. Similarly, the truly unsuccessful New Deal programs, the WPA for instance, were, without exception, programs that had not first been developed in small-scale experimentation in state or local governments but were initiated as comprehensive, national panaceas.

(5) "Make sure that you cannot learn from experience" is the next prescription for non-performance in public administration. "Do not think through in advance what you expect; do not then feed back from results to expectations so as to find out not only what you can do well, but also to find out what your weaknesses, your limitations, and your blind spots are."

Every organization, like every individual, does certain things well. They are the things that "come easy to one's hand." Nevertheless, every organization, like every individual, is also prone to typical mistakes, has typical limitations, and has its own blind spots. Unless the organization shapes its own expectations to reflect the accuracy of results, it will not find out what it does well and, thus, not learn to apply its strengths. Moreover, it will not find out what it does poorly and will, thus, have no opportunity to improve or to compensate for its weaknesses or its blind spots. Typically, for instance, certain institutions expect results much too fast and throw in the towel much too soon. A good many of the "War on Poverty" agencies did just that. Also, there are many organizations which wait much too long before they face up to the fact that a program or a policy is unsuccessful—our Vietnam policies, both civilian and military, probably belong here. One can only learn by feedback, and we know that feedback from results always improves performance capacity and effectiveness. Without it, however, the weaknesses, the limitations, the blind spots increasingly dominate. Without learning from results through feedback, any organization, like any individual, must inevitably deteriorate in its capacity to perform. Yet, in most public service institutions such feedback functions are either non-existent or viewed with casual skepticism. If the results do not conform to expectations, they are all too frequently dismissed as irrelevant, as indications of the obtuseness of clients, as

MARCH/APRIL 1980

the reactionary obscurantism of the public, or, worst of all, as evidence of the need to "make another study." Most public service institutions, governmental ones as well as non-governmental ones, are budget-focused, but the budgets measure efforts rather than results. For performance, the budget needs to be paralleled with a statement of expected results—and with systematic feedback from results—on expenditures and on efforts. Otherwise, the agency will, almost immediately, channel more and more of its efforts toward non-results and will become the prisoner of its own limitations, its weaknesses, and its blind spots rather than the beneficiary of its own strengths.

(6) The last of the administrator's deadly sins is the most damning and the most common: the inability to abandon. It alone guarantees non-performance, and within a fairly short time.

Traditional political theory, the theory inherited from Aristotle, holds that the tasks of government are grounded in the nature of civil society and, thus, are immutable: defense, justice, law and order. However, very few of the tasks of modern public administration, whether governmental or non-governmental public service institutions, such as the hospital, the Red Cross, the university, or the Boy Scouts, are of that nature. Almost all of them are manmade rather than grounded in the basic essentials of society, and most of them are of very recent origin to boot. They all, therefore, share a common fate: they must become pointless at some juncture in time. They may become pointless because the need to which they address themselves no longer exists or is no longer urgent. They may become pointless because the old need appears in such a new guise as to make obsolete present design, shape, concerns and policies. The great environmental problem of 1910, for instance—and it was a very real danger—was the horrendous pollution by the horse, with its stench and its liquid and solid wastes, which threatened to bury the cities of that time. If we had been as environmentally conscious then as we are now, we would have saddled ourselves with agencies which only ten years later would have become totally pointless and yet, predictably, ten years later they would have redoubled their efforts, since they would have totally lost sight of their objectives. Moreover, a program may become pointless when it fails to produce results despite all efforts, as do our present American welfare programs. Finally—and most dangerous of all—a program becomes pointless when it achieves its objectives. That we have a "welfare mess" today is, in large measure, a result of our having maintained the welfare programs of the New Deal after they had achieved their objectives around 1940 or 1941. These programs were designed to tackle the problems caused by the temporary unemployment of experienced (and almost entirely white) male heads of families—no wonder that they then malperformed when applied to the totally different problems caused in large measure by the mass movement of black females into the cities 10 or 15 years later.

The basic assumption of public service institutions,

governmental or non-governmental ones alike, is immortality. It is a foolish assumption. It dooms the organization and its programs to non-performance and non-results. The only rational assumption is that every public service program will sooner or later—and usually sooner—outlive its usefulness, at least insofar as its present form, its present objectives, and its present policies are concerned. A public service program that does not conduct itself in contemplation of its own mortality will very soon become incapable of performance. In its original guise it cannot produce results any longer; the objectives have either ceased to matter, have proven unobtainable, or have been attained. Indeed, the more successful a public service agency is, the sooner will it work itself out of the job; then it can only become an impediment to performance, if not an embarrassment.

A public service program that does not conduct itself in contemplation of its own mortality will very soon become incapable of performance.

The public service administrator who wants results and performance will, thus, have to build into his own organization an organized process for abandonment. He will have to learn to ask every few years: "If we did not do this already, would we now, knowing what we know now, go into this?" And if the answer is "no," he better not say "let's make another study" or "let's ask for a bigger budget." He better ask: "How can we get out of this?" or at least: "How can we stop pouring more effort, more resources, more people into this?"

II

Avoidance of these six "deadly sins" does not, perhaps, guarantee performance and results in the public service organization, but avoiding these six deadly sins is the prerequisite for performance and results. To be sure, there is nothing very recondite about these "do's and don'ts." They are simple, elementary, indeed, obvious. Yet, as everyone in public administration knows, most administrators commit most of these "sins" all the time and, indeed, all of them most of the time.

One reason is plain cowardice. It is "risky" to spell out attainable, concrete, measurable goals—or so the popular wisdom goes. It is also mundane, pedestrian and likely to "turn off" backers or donors. "The world's best medical care" is so much more "sexy" than "every emergency patient will be seen by a qualified triage nurse within three minutes." Furthermore, to set priorities seems even more dangerous—one risks the wrath of the people who do not really care for electric power or fertilizer, but want to protect the little snail darter or the spotted lousewort. Finally, of course, you do not "rank" in the bureaucracy unless you spend a billion dollars and employ an army of clerks—"fat is beautiful."

Perhaps so, but experience does not bear out the common wisdom. The public service administrators who

face up to goal-setting, to ordered priorities, and to concentrating their resources (the public service administrators who are willing to ask: "What is the smallest number of people we need to attain our objectives?") may not always be popular, but they are respected, and they rarely have any trouble at all. They may not get as far in their political careers as the ones who put popularity above performance, but, in the end, they are the ones we remember.

III

But perhaps even more important than cowardice as an explanation for the tendency of so much of public administration today to commit itself to policies that can only result in non-performance is the lack of concern with performance in public administration theory.

For a century from the Civil War to 1960 or so, the performance of public service institutions and programs was taken for granted in the United States. It could be taken for granted because earlier administrators somehow knew not to commit the "deadly sins" I have outlined here. As a result, the discipline of public administration—a peculiarly American discipline, by the way—saw no reason to concern itself with performance. It was not a problem. It focused instead on the political process, on how programs come into being. *Who Gets What, When, How?*, the title of Harold Lasswell's 1936 classic on politics, neatly sums up one specific focus of American public administration, with its challenge to traditional political theory. The other focus was procedural: "The orderly conduct of the business of government" an earlier generation called it. It was a necessary concern in an America that had little or no administrative tradition and experience and was suddenly projected into very large public service programs, first in World War I, then in the New Deal, and finally in World War II.

We needed work on all phases of what we now call "management": personnel, budgeting, organization, and so on. But these are inside concerns. Now we need hard, systematic work on making public service institutions perform.

As I noted, for a century, from the Civil War until 1960 or so, performance of public service institutions was taken for granted. For the last 20 years, however, malperformance is increasingly being taken for granted. Great programs are still being proposed, are still being debated, and, in some instances, are even still being enacted, but few people expect them to produce results. All we really expect now, whether from a new Department of Education in Washington or from a reorganization of the state government by a new governor who preaches that "small is beautiful," is more expenditure, a bigger budget, and a more ineffectual bureaucracy.

The malperformance of public service institutions may well be a symptom only. The cause may be far more basic: a crisis in the very foundations and assumptions on which rests that proudest achievement of the Modern Age, national administrative government.²

But surely the malperformance of the public service institution is in itself a contributing factor to the sickness of government, and a pretty big one. Avoiding the "deadly sins" of public administration may only give symptomatic relief for whatever ails modern government, but at least we know how to do it.

Notes

1. On this, see my article, "What Results Should You Expect? A User's Guide to MPO," *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 36, pp. 12-19.
2. I hope eventually to finish a book on this subject, tentatively entitled "Can Government Be Saved?," on which I have been working for ten years or more.