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### **Human Resource Management as a Core Dimension of Public Administration**

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Human Resource Management (HRM) is a core function of any organization because the people of the organization are its most important resource. HRM, when done well, ensures that the organization has the people it needs when it needs them and that they are well qualified for and motivated to do their jobs well. It creates and manages guidelines for recruiting, selecting and training new employees, compensating and rewarding employees appropriately, for disciplining and terminating them if necessary, and for providing for retirement, resignation, and other activities involved in separating from the organization. When done poorly, HRM has the potential to create inefficiencies, reduce effectiveness, and create serious liabilities for the organization.

In public organizations, it can be argued, the human resource management function serves an added role as a steward of democracy. It ensures that employees are treated fairly and equitably, that diversity within the organization reflects the diverse populations in the society at large, and that public jobs are open to all qualified citizens (Rosenbloom and Kravchuk, 2005;

Ingraham, 2005). These are critical tasks for public organizations and for the democracy they serve.

At the same time, human resource management faces massive challenges. At the turn of this century, organizations throughout government confronted the conundrum of high retirement rates and limited hiring capacity. Although interest in the public service, broadly speaking, is high, the manifestation of that interest in the form of desire for government employment is distinctly lower than in the previous twenty-five years. The credentials and ethical commitment of many appointed leaders in the federal government have been questioned (Pfiffner, 2000; Aberbach and Rockman, 2000). Even more fundamental, however, are nagging problems related to the failure of the public, elected officials, and –to be honest, some government managers—to address fundamental questions: Why and how does human resource management matter to good government? Why is strategic human resource management in public organizations central to achieving effectiveness? These questions remain fundamental well into the second century of the study of public administration because five core sets of recurrent and interrelated problems underpin them.

First, Human Resource Management continues to be viewed as “civil service” and “personnel”, not as a core management function. In fact, it is often described as a technical undertaking –dealing with payrolls, arcane rules and procedures, and specifying policies and regulations for the managers in the organization – separate from management and separate from long term strategic decision making. At least partly as a result, the people of the organization have been viewed as a cost, not as an organizational resource to be strategically targeted, developed, and retained. This perspective is compounded by the status of personnel as the single

largest budget category in most public organizations' operating budgets. People are perceived to be not only a cost, but a substantial cost.

Second, the civil service label is inevitably linked to bureaucracy and bureaucratic structure and the rigid rules, processes, and systems that epitomize bureaucracies. There are good reasons for this perception. The pay structures, graded hierarchies, and standardization that typify bureaucracies accurately describe many civil service systems. The stability and the insularity that such structures provide can serve public organizations well if they protect public employees from inappropriate political intrusion and pressure. They can also guarantee citizens some predictability in the programs and organizations that serve them. Bureaucratic structures do not serve government well, however, when they resist pressure for necessary change, when they become insulated from the citizens they serve, and when they become more characterized by stability than by energy, expertise, and responsiveness to changing circumstances.

A third factor inhibiting the progress of human resource management as a field of study and professional practice is found in the structural and resource constraints that limit the ability of public organizations not only to recruit and hire necessary employees, but also to appropriately motivate and reward them once they are in the organization. Standardized compensation systems make it difficult to reward excellent individual performance and to send important signals to those who do not perform well. Limited resource availability links directly to the inability to provide meaningful rewards, even when the system permits them. Discretionary financial incentives are simply viewed as inappropriate by many citizens and elected officials. Until recently, the ability of public managers to reward employees for "going the extra mile" was limited (Volcker Commission, 2003; Selden and Jacobson, 2007). The extensive presence of public unions – public organizations are roughly three times more likely to

be unionized than their private sector counterparts – further limits the discretionary ability to reward some employees, but not reward others (Ingraham, 2006).

Rigid organizational and program boundaries also inhibit ways of working that are increasingly recognized as central to effective performance. To the extent that performance rewards have been created in public organizations, they are individual rewards. Mechanisms to reward teamwork and collaboration within and across agencies and even sectors are not only difficult to design, but are extremely difficult to implement in an environment characterized by rigid boundaries that are job, program, and organization specific.

Finally, strong leadership is rarely identified with human resource management. A leading strategic HR figure in the federal government describes himself as a “personnel weenie”, rather than as a leader advocating and implementing reform. (Proceedings, 2006). All of the demands and challenges that make leadership necessary in other arenas of management are also critical to good human resource management, however. In fact, effective leadership is a consistent characteristic of effective strategic HR systems. Inside the organization, leadership matters in the extent to which internal motivation and reward systems are aligned, communication is clear and consistent, future leaders are developed through succession planning, and the organization has a clear sense of mission and purpose. External to the organization, leadership is equally important in marshalling and creating support for the organization and its mission (Ingraham et al., 2003; Goldsmith and Barzelay, 2005).

In many public organizations, these tasks are complicated by the political environment and by the political appointee structure that places a limited number of appointed officials into a largely career staffed organization. Political appointees are positioned at the top of the organization and are intended to serve policy guiding, linking and political representation

functions. For longer term leadership purposes, however, their presence can present breaks in the mission clarity of the organization. The program- and agency-specific experience and expertise of political appointees rarely matches that of the top ranks of the career service. In the federal government, as the most obvious example, the lower ranks of appointees often have substantially less experience and they tend to stay in the organization for shorter periods of time (NAPA, 2004). For complex tasks such as shaping the human resources of an organization, such flux and change in emphasis can be dysfunctional. Further, the lack of fit between the demands of the organization's tasks and appointee leader skills can have tragic consequences in the public sector, as the FEMA experience in Hurricane Katrina demonstrated.

Collectively, the five problems described above inhibit the ability to recruit "the best and the brightest" to public sector jobs in general, and to critical human resource management positions in particular. The problems are readily acknowledged by HR practitioners and are well documented in scholarly writings.

### **Human Resource Management in *Public Administration Review***

The rather turbulent history and development of human resource management thus suggested, as well as the current challenges it faces, are well reflected in the pages of *Public Administration Review* (PAR). Human Resource Management articles in PAR have not been the dominant topic, but have been consistently present (averaging slightly more than 10% of the total articles published) from the mid-1940s to the present. In the same time period, the focus of analysis has been the U.S. federal government, with much more limited coverage of state and

local governments and non-profit organizations. Comparative analyses were also a minor presence.

### ***Public Service Values and HRM***

The *Public Administration Review* articles also identify other important dimensions of the debate and the discipline. The most prevalent and consistent of these are the values inherent in the ideal of a neutral and professional civil service. Merit as the embodiment of a professional bureaucracy that finds a secure place in democratic governance based on expertise, on quality, and – from the 1960s onward – on representing the diversity of ideas and cultures in the American population has driven the analysis of HRM in public administration for well over a century. Certainly Wilson’s portrayal of an administrative cadre that could “straighten the path of government” (1887), as well as the arguments for neutrality and efficiency that followed (and continue to the present) contributed to the dialogue that underpins fundamental ideas about the career public service.

Kaufman (1956, 1969) and others have argued, however, that the tensions inherent in American democracy would inevitably be manifest in the institutions that democracy created, resulting in a “cycle” or “balancing” of values at any given point (Rosenbloom, 2004). Inevitably, the institution of the career civil service, created to counteract the excesses of political patronage would itself become the target of calls to embrace different values and different priorities. There is also substantial coverage and discussion of issues related to reform. The remarkable growth of the career service during the New Deal and World War II catalyzed some of the most widespread debates, leading to articles in PAR in the 1950s with titles such as

“Balancing Good Politics and Good Administration” (Lawrence, 1954) “Civil Service versus Merit” (Gladieux, 1952), and “The Federal Career Service: What Next?” (Emmerich and Belsley, 1954). Debate about the right balance also characterized many analyses before and after the passage of the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 (see, for example, Newland, 1976; Campbell, 1978; Foster, 1978; Rosen, 1978; and Nigro, 1981). The perceived conflict in many of these articles was again between politics and administration: the power of the president over the bureaucracy and the responsiveness of top members of the career service to political direction (the Senior Executive Service, created by the CSRA of 1978 was the object of much of this discussion). The 1978 reform also sharpened a debate that had been endemic since the early part of the century: the extent to which business principles can and should apply to the management of government (Rainey, 1979). That interest and debate continues in the 21st century in discussions of performance, measurement of performance, and potential for rewarding good performance and punishing bad (Lovrich et al., 1980; Nalbandian, 1981; Perry et al., 1989; Ingraham et al., 2000; Durant et al., 2006).

Another major theme emerged in the discipline, in the practice of public management, and in the literature represented by articles in PAR in the years and decades following judicial decisions and landmark legislation related to civil rights and social justice. Thus, articles addressing affirmative action (Nalbandian, 1989; Hays 1993), sexual harassment (Lee and Greenlaw, 1995 and 2000; Jackson and Newman, 2004), and the Americans with Disabilities Act (Koenig, 1998) were published. The values inherent in these broad social changes signaled the re-emergence of another value in public management: equity.

Equity, as it is broadly interpreted in representative bureaucracy (Frederickson et al., 1973; Frederickson, 1974; Wise, 1990; Kelly, 1998), in fair treatment of diversity within the

organization (Naff, 1994; Stivers, 1995; Lewis and Durst, 1995; Hale, 1999; Lewis, 1997), and in discussions of the responsibility of public organizations to deal with issues of diversity through workplace and work restructuring (Bruce and Reed, 1994; Golembiewski and Proehi, 1980; Rainey and Wolf, 1981; Chadwin et al., 1995; Soni, 2000; Salzstein et al., 2001) has been a significant theme in PAR, as well as in other research, in practice, and in the classroom. Practices such as flextime and telecommuting have been technical parts of these developments; much more sweeping influences such as affirmative action have had a dramatic impact.

### *Valuing Public Employees*

Closely related to these perspectives on public administration and the values and practices of human resource management are the emerging dialogues about the value of public employees. Because the people of an organization are frequently its most significant cost, they have most often been viewed in precisely that way – as a cost to be minimized, rather than as a resource to be developed. In many ways, this seems to contradict the prevalence of discussions in PAR and elsewhere about training of public employees and education for public employment. A critical distinction in alternative approaches to human resource management helps to explain. In the early years of the civil service, through scientific management, and through many of the reforms of the past forty years, public employees were viewed in a technical, standardized way: as standardized units comparable across government, and primarily identified by job or occupation. More recently, initiatives such as Strategic Human Resource Management have argued that the many distinctions among public employees be recognized, that these distinctions, strengths, and weaknesses become part of the organization's long term resource development



strategy, that the critical strengths and opportunities that employees represent be viewed as a key organizational resource, and that standardized training be replaced with more individually crafted career development plans and strategies.

This shift was presaged by a move away from the long standing view of motivation in public sector organizations as fundamentally like that of private sector employees. In that view, financial incentives were primary. The stability and predictable benefits provided by public employment were also very important. We do not suggest that either of these assumptions were totally in error, but that their simplicity failed to encompass the many influences on motivation and incentives that we now know to be in play. The challenges of the job, the opportunity to participate in important programs, the ability to utilize personal expertise, and the “life stage” of the employee, for example, have been demonstrated to have an impact on public employees. Further, work such as that by Perry and Wise (1990) explored the particular dimensions of public service motivation which—to summarize too briefly—includes strong willingness and perhaps even need to participate in providing a broad public good: to perform a public service in the most basic sense. More recently, Houston and Cartwright (2007) have confirmed that many public servants are motivated by a higher calling grounded in compassion, helping others, and feeling connected to their peers and to the organization.

Thus, the many years of analysis and discussion of human resource management in the pages of *Public Administration Review* have covered the history of the endeavor, the place of public human resource management in a democratic system of government, the values that democracy inherently transmits to public HRM and the tensions they may present, and detailed descriptions and prescriptions of training, education, and development of public employees. But what must be added to prepare for a future public service and for public managers who can

strategically utilize the resources that the people of an organization represent? We suggest that this list is also extensive.

### **Human Resource Management for the Future**

In looking to the future, we argue that three broad interrelated issues can serve as focal points for research about and the practice of human resource management in public organizations. First, we emphasize the need for a strategic perspective in human resource management. Effective organizational performance demands that human resource professionals be at the table when important decisions are made, and that top administrators discard the notion of personnel as a specialized and lower level function. These demands go both ways; HR leaders and employees must learn to be effective in such settings which are increasingly complex. HR leaders not only need to be conversant with information presented in many forms (the spoken and written word, raw data, statistical analyses, and graphic representations), they must also be prepared to confront issues that require technical, scientific and technological expertise. The individuals with whom HR leaders may work in these contexts may include consultants or temporary contract employees who may not share the same degree of organizational history or loyalty. Communicating effectively and identifying shared strategic priorities is made both more important and more difficult.

Second, human resource management must grapple with adapting the concept of merit to different organizational and societal environments. Merit within a traditional civil service system has most often referred to non-partisan competence. As increased attention has been placed on measuring and improving organizational performance, human resource managers need to

develop means of assessing and rewarding meritorious and effective performance of employees at both individual and group levels. Most government organizations, as well as many nonprofit organizations, do not control their own resources for this purpose. When budgets are set externally, rewards are often viewed as superfluous because of a common perception that public employees are well paid and have generous job guarantees. Beyond the challenge of securing sufficient resources to reward employees, the performance review and evaluation systems in public organizations are often highly standardized and rigid, making it difficult for supervisors to differentiate among employees. This is one reason why performance evaluations, while successful in other settings, has had difficulty establishing firm roots in the public sector.

Finally, greater attention needs to be directed to preparing public sector human resource management for greater flexibility and responsiveness to change. Rigid organizational boundaries and entrenched rules cannot continue to dominate if public organizations are to effectively and quickly respond to the changes that are now endemic in our society. Among the most significant of these will be shifting sector boundaries, proliferating information technology, and expanded notions of diversity. While we cannot anticipate the specific changes with which human resource managers will need to contend, it is clear that strategic capacity will be critical. A recent example is provided by the U.S. Department of Veteran's affairs. Confronted by veterans from the Iraq and Afghan wars, as well as from other military engagements, the VA was not prepared to address either the scope or the nature of the mental and physical injuries incurred by military personnel. The VA did not have sufficient medical personnel in their facilities to address the need, nor did they have an effective strategy for communicating their dramatic needs to external decision makers. They did not even have the capacity to track data within their own

organization. The sad outcome was a public pummeling from elected officials and the media, further damaging the image of the public service.

In the discussion below, we focus on the conditions that suggest the need for increased attention to these issues and their implications for the study and practice of human resource management. Following a discussion of each of the three issues, we examine their interactions with an eye toward the competencies they will demand from HR professionals. Most notably, the issues suggest that effective communication skills, the ability to maintain and enhance accountability while exercising greater discretion, and the ability to think long-term while also responding to short term change will be critical. We suggest that these issues and competencies provide a rich research agenda for human resource scholars and should be top priorities for human resource practitioners.

### ***Strategic Human Resource Management and Performance***

A major component of the future study and analysis of HRM will be using the activity as a strategic tool rather than an operational task within the organization. As we noted earlier, the strategic perspective necessitates a substantial shift from the perspective of the early years of HRM. The traditional “personnel” perspective, with its assumption of a plentiful labor pool and of a strong need to provide security and stability for the workforce, emphasized screening of potential employees and directing those who were successful to specific and narrowly defined jobs and tasks. Strategic human resource management (SHRM), on the other hand, emphasizes the careful analysis of the jobs, talents, and expertise necessary for completing critical

components of the agencies mission and gathering in those with the necessary skills, talents, and expertise.

The analytic emphasis in SHRM does not assume that the necessary jobs and tasks are all known, but rather that present and future needs should be carefully considered and analyzed. This sea change in perspective on the role of human resource management emerged in PAR in the 1990s. It is well represented in other literature in the field as well. Reform to strengthen strategic capacity has been nearly constant in the federal government for the past thirty years, but the greatest efforts have actually occurred at the state level. Georgia and Florida are the most dramatic examples (Kellough and Nigro, 2005). Indeed, the diversity of state practices provides both a laboratory for change and an excellent learning guide for the study of HRM.

The most sweeping of the changes noted above have been legislative; others have been more informal and narrower in scope. Simplification efforts such as broad- banding of jobs and occupations; less complex and more decentralized recruiting, decentralized testing and hiring processes; more straightforward grievance and disciplinary procedures, and generally less insular policies and procedures for HRM are all intended to align HR more closely with other strategic organizational activities (Selden and Jacobson, 2007; Rainey, 2003). Many of these do not require statutory change.

A closely related development is the emergence of organizational performance as a priority and a focus on the role that HR and other management functions can play in that performance (Meier and O'Toole, 2004). The difficulties endemic in linking public sector performance to specific outcomes are powerfully present in assessing management impact, but the significance of developing management capacity as a prelude to performance is now widely accepted (Ingraham et al., 2003). The strategic development and assessment of human resource

management, therefore, is becoming more central to public management in general, as well as to the activity itself. Positioning human resources within the management team as part of strategic HRM facilitates the recognition that the knowledge, skills and abilities of the employees are part of the human capital of the organization, and thus part of its performance equation.

### ***Managing Modern Merit***

As governments have struggled to respond to changing societal conditions and demands, the merit systems that HRM manages have undergone substantial change in many places. The changes are immediately obvious in terminology: public management, human resource management, and human capital management have replaced references to personnel administration and civil service. Emphasis on performance has generally replaced emphasis on process. Emphases on strategic management and workforce planning have replaced emphasis on rules and protection.

This is not to say, as some have suggested, that merit has been abandoned (Berman, 2005; Kettl 2015). It has not. It is being modernized and refined for current needs in important ways, but the core components of merit – competence, qualification, and freedom from political pressure in the workplace – remain unchanged. The core mission of human resource management – to support these values – remains consistent as well. But while support of merit's core components remains a central purpose of a public HRM system, it is not the only purpose. Rather, support of this core is a threshold condition for pursuit of the ultimate objective: effective performance of public organizations.

As we observed earlier, this change shifted the basic stance of public HRM. As a result, it is increasingly important to disassemble the principles and values of merit and meritorious

service from the structures and rules that can insulate public organizations from their environments (and from citizens). Calls for such actions are not isolated to the United States, but are worldwide, as are the difficult actions and decisions that now confront public HR managers (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004). The decisions and the balances they imply demand a clear set of guiding values. But to support those values, many now argue that transformed skills and competencies are necessary. The US Government Accountability Office (2005 -21st Century Challenges) and others suggest that, at a minimum, transformed abilities should include better communication skills, better collaboration and coordination capacities, and better “partnering” capabilities.

At the same time and at every level of government, a consistent focus on longer term performance will also be necessary. Individual performance will matter, but collective performance will be key. Finding and supporting ways to incentivize and develop such performance, as well as measuring and rewarding it, should be at the top of the public HR management agenda (Durant et al., 2006; Shui-Yan and Moon, 2005). There are many potential sources of experience and design to consider in this quest –diverse perspectives within the organization, state and local governments, other nations, other federal agencies at that level, and occasionally the private sector have lessons to be shared. Learning from them can be part of moving ahead.

For human resource management, the implications of these developments and demands are enormous. Designing motivation and incentive systems that recognize and reward the necessary new skills is in relatively early stages and now exists in very few places. Even “new” reform ideas, such as those advanced in the federal government in the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Defense, continue to emphasize reward for individual

performance. Most budgetary arrangements do not allow for rewarding an employee who performs exceptionally well outside of organizational boundaries, or members of a key team who are from other organizations. Even new and broader job descriptions do not often include collaborative performance of tasks (Ingraham and Getha-Taylor, 2009). Working in tandem, HR scholars and practitioners need to develop, implement and assess alternative approaches to merit which reward collaborative behaviors and contribution to organizational outcomes.

### ***Flexibility and Responsiveness to Change***

As becoming more strategic and more adept at adapting merit to the current environment imply, human resource management is moving toward becoming more flexible and responsive to change. The environment in which public organizations exist in the 21st century is more open, more turbulent, and more consistently subject to destabilizing change. HRM structures, most of which are built on traditional hierarchical models, have become targets of reform in this setting. The intent is most frequently to make them more highly attuned to performance, to greater flexibility, and to greater responsiveness. But most contemporary reform proposals do not target three changes that are likely to serve as platforms for the challenges that public organizations will address. Shifting sector boundaries, advances in information technology, and expanded concepts of diversity are “quiet challenges”, but will have profound impacts.

### ***Shifting Sector Boundaries***



Public sector human resource management faces several challenges associated with the more permeable boundaries between the public, nonprofit and for-profit sectors. Employees are more mobile and service arrangements are more creative, both of which complicate the task of human resource managers. Traditional civil service policies were developed for a group of career employees who generally dedicated their entire professional careers to a single organization within a particular government jurisdiction. The modern workforces' mobility is evidenced not only by employees who frequently change jobs, but also by those who move back and forth across levels of government and different sectors – sometimes frequently – during their professional careers. Conventional methods of recruiting and selecting employees – predicated on a “typical” combination of education and experience to gain entry to the government workforce and then advancement through the ranks – is not well suited to this more mobile workforce. Similarly, the traditional benefits of public sector employment – job security and comprehensive medical and retirement packages – do not carry as much weight in the new employment environment. Determining how to effectively motivate employees, always a difficult management task, is further complicated when individuals transition frequently in their careers and do not develop traditional organizational commitment and loyalties to the organizations they pass through. Many government agencies, including those at the federal level, confront this challenge most conspicuously in their efforts to recruit and retain young people. Interest in public employment has dropped consistently over the past decade despite growing motivation to engage in public service. As governments experience the “retirement boom” expected in the coming years, this inability to replace retirees with new and younger employees will present a significant challenge.

Creative service arrangements, which may include contracting out, hybrid organizations, public-private partnerships, or full-scale privatization of services, also have implications for HRM. In some cases, these changes are pursued precisely for their potential to exempt the agencies or programs from rules and regulations regarding collective bargaining, compensation or benefits (Moe, 2001). In other instances, the HR implications of an alternative service delivery arrangement may not be fully understood or considered. For example, sorting out the constitutional rights of private employees performing public functions has generated a series of judicial rulings with which human resource managers need to be familiar (Koenig, 1997 and 1998). The legal guidelines in this area are emergent and often not clear. Even vigilant monitoring of rulings by organizations pursuing alternative service delivery arrangements will leave them in a constant learning and adapting mode.

Governments at all levels lag far behind need in recruiting, hiring, and developing contract managers for the many jobs that are now contracted to other organizations and sectors. In fact, full analysis of the requisite skills is still underway in many public organizations. Further, the consistently increasing rate of contracting complicates the work of human resource managers in recruiting and developing requisite managerial skills across the board. The trend toward increasing discretion and flexibility in many HRM systems has created the need for managers to confront balancing their authority with a need to be more accountable and open about their actions. Third party management adds a new dimension of complexity to this balance: public organizations and managers must be responsible for the actions of persons who do not work for them directly and who are not located within their organization. Thus, even as flexibility in working toward the agency mission is achieved, difficulty in using the new tools is very likely.

The tensions so prominent in effective management in a public system are at once exacerbated and more open.

As public services are increasingly provided by entities that are not entirely public, and individuals enter and exit the public service in more varied ways, human resource managers must expand their skills accordingly. They must be prepared to modify recruitment, training, and benefits practices to meet the needs of a changing cadre of employees. They must also be able to articulate the strategic implications for the organization and community of altered employment relations associated with alternative service arrangements.

The frequency with which public managers and their employees are called upon to participate in contract management with for- and non-profit organizations, to collaborate with other organizations and levels of government, and to perform the work of their own organization as members of a team is a hallmark of modern management. The ability to share information quickly and well is central to successful performance. The ability to communicate and work across program and organizational boundaries can be both enhanced and complicated by information technology, which represents a profoundly important change.

### ***Advances in Technology***

Much of the flexibility and increased responsiveness that HRM has achieved has been related to the rapid rise of technology in many HR processes. The incorporation of HR considerations into other organizational management processes has also been enhanced. Kim (2005) observes, however, that even as these advances were occurring, they added a new dimension of complexity to the HR function. Recruiting of IT professionals is sometimes

difficult, as is retention. Kim finds relatively high levels of job related stress and burnout among IT workers, suggesting one reason for retention problems. Pay appropriate to the level of expertise demanded for many information technology related jobs lags in many governments and triggers the need for re-examination of pay scales, the fit of technology related jobs within existing job and occupational series, and the need to tailor special recruiting strategies to likely employment pools. Many governments – most notably the federal government – currently use special hiring authorities outside of regular hiring and pay limits to address these needs. Several states and large municipalities have found it necessary to use head hunting firms and to consider non-traditional backgrounds in filling these high demand technology positions.

Despite these issues, the speed at which technology allows information exchange and decision making to occur has altered virtually all organizational management processes. IT has enhanced communication among management systems as well as within them. It has permitted information retrieval and analysis with fewer staff. IT has permitted HR practices such as flexiplace to be developed. It has enhanced the ability of organizations to advertise open positions broadly and nearly instantaneously. For human resource management, the presence of effective technology systems has become a tool in most critical functions. In a democratic sense, IT has vastly enhanced the potential for organizations to communicate with citizens. The extent to which public organizations realize that potential depends on decisions made regarding the transparency, accessibility, privacy and security of their IT systems. Similarly, technology requires human resource professionals to consider what information about employees should be collected and stored, how it will be secured, and under what circumstances it will be disseminated and used. Strategically, better and more timely information is provided for decision purposes, so effective IT also improves an organization's strategic capacity.

IT has also, however, raised unpredicted problems. The ability to gather, store, access and utilize large amounts of information about employees and those screened for government services has been enormously useful. At the same time, the protections of such vast quantities of personal and private information has proven difficult for both public and private organizations. Hacking of personnel system information has occurred in an unknown number of organizations; in the most publicized cases, millions of personnel files were accessed without authorization. The implications of these security breaches are difficult to comprehend, but the problem will certainly be of increasing priority for organizations and HR leaders as more and more information is in digital format.

### ***Expanding Definitions of Diversity***

Along with the changes in sector boundaries and advances in technology, the environment in which public organizations now operate is characterized by increased diversity within the workplace and in the communities governments serve. The population of the United States is becoming increasingly diverse, with dramatic increases in the Hispanic population and steady growth among African Americans and Asian Americans. Older individuals continue to work well beyond conventional retirement age, and workplaces have made accommodations to include individuals with disabilities. Increased diversity has been accompanied by changing attitudes about and expanding definitions of the diversity to which HR professionals must respond.

The value of representativeness has a long history in public personnel administration; current and future human resource professionals need to understand that history but not be bound

by it (Bailey, 2004). Historical definitions of diversity have focused on protected classes and legal requirements for non-discrimination most notably on the basis of race and gender (Herbert, 1974; Cayer and Sigelman, 1980; Naff, 1994). Applying a legal perspective, new groups were afforded attention only as the laws were expanded to provide for their protection, as in the case of age and disability status. The shift from a non-discrimination or equal employment opportunity (EEO) perspective to one which emphasized a more pro-active affirmative action approach is both well documented and perpetually controversial (Hays, 1993). Staying informed of legal developments in this field and maintaining compliance is necessary but also insufficient. Human resource managers not only need to recognize the benefits of diversity, but to embrace a full range of differences and to value the contributions such differences can make to the organization (Soni, 2000).

Shifting from a legal perspective to a managing for diversity perspective affects the full range of human resource management policies and practices and, by definition, expands the definition of diversity to include many characteristics not addressed by the law. Moving beyond race, gender, age, disability status, and religion, modern era Human Resource professionals also need to be able to respond to the needs of employees and the public who differ in terms of other criteria including, for example, sexual orientation, family status, culture and language.

Traditional benefits may not address the needs of employees with same sex domestic partners (Lewis, 1997). Similarly, dual-income earner families, single-parent families, and those with eldercare responsibilities may have very different priorities and perspectives about work scheduling and benefits (Salzstein et al., 2001). Language diversity and different cultural norms among client populations and workers generates a number of communication challenges for the HR manager.

Increasing diversity and expanded concepts of diversity demand that HR managers reassess practices related to recruitment, the validity of selection processes, the relevance of compensation and benefits packages, and means of motivation and communication. In all aspects of human resource management – recruitment and selection, training and evaluation, and communication and discipline – cultural competence is essential to manage effectively and to maintain legitimacy with client groups and the general public. HR managers will need to be able to respect and value the contributions of people who differ from themselves in terms of culture, language, class, race, ethnic background, religion, age, and other factors (White, 2004). To do so requires a willingness to change and to learn from others—capabilities made more difficult for HRM professionals accustomed to adherence to rules and regulations.

### **HRM Competencies: Communication and Accountability**

The move toward strategic human resource management, new definitions of merit, and increased flexibility and responsiveness are important in other ways as well. A shift from insularity, standardized treatment of all individuals, and rigid following of rules to greater integration into strategic decision making, recognizing and rewarding performance and collaboration, and responsiveness to internal and external changes fuels the need for different abilities and talents for HR managers. Two broad sets of capacities stand out: 1) greater capacity and skills in communication and 2) better understanding of the implications of balancing increased discretion with improved accountability.

Virtually every development in modern HRM demands greater ability to communicate effectively – across difference and diversity, across program lines, across organizational

boundaries, across levels of government, and across sector boundaries. If HR professionals are to participate effectively in meetings with top agency and jurisdiction administrators, and to have human resources included in the strategic decisions of the organization, they must be able to articulate the strategic value of human capital. Activities such as performance management and the conduct of performance assessments mandate that both managers and employees have the ability to speak consistently and accurately about performance objectives and ability to meet them. Failure to address the development of these capacities is among the leading causes of performance management dysfunction.

Other discretionary activities, such as placement of employees in a broad banded system may appear less taxing in this respect, but also involve very high levels of interactive communication. Still others, such as determination of individual performance rewards, carry special responsibilities. Assuring that individual rewards are perceived as fair, the process is considered worthy of trust, and employees see rewards as clearly linked to performance are Herculean tasks in any setting. In the absence of effective communications, they are impossible.

The ability to effectively balance increased discretion with improved accountability may also fall into the Herculean category, particularly in a political environment with multiple stakeholder perspectives. It is in this arena, however, where the ever present need for awareness and understanding of the democratic setting of HRM in public organizations is crucial. The nature of public organizations subjects them to many competing assessment perspectives: those of elected leaders, of appointed officials, of citizens as taxpayers, of citizens as service recipients and so on. The nature of competing assessments is that they are likely to be different and often in conflict. But their impact on setting the parameters for success in public organizations is uniform. Activities and actions that were initially unchallenged may well be challenged in the



face of perceived or real failure. As noted earlier, the poor performance of federal, state, and local agencies and authorities in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina presents a stark example here. From the narrowest self-interest perspective of public managers, the increased transparency that accompanies calls for greater accountability also increases the likelihood of more criticism and other negative actions. Paradoxically, acting in more accountable ways increases both personal and organizational vulnerability, sometimes for actions beyond their control.

### **Most Pressing Questions**

Given the challenges identified above, several large and critically important questions loom and demand the attention of the next generation of scholars. Among the most pressing questions are:

1. What is the role of “merit” in modern public life? Does merit need to be re-conceptualized or operationalized differently in a world and workplace characterized by greater diversity and more networked and collaborative activities?
2. What are the most effective management strategies in environments of extensive employee protections and high levels of unionization?
3. How is the value of “public service” incorporated into contemporary recruitment strategies? What are the most important lessons learned about motivation and commitment in this regard?

How can greater societal diversity and advances in technology be leveraged to make both the prospect and the experience of government employment exciting and rewarding? How can government organizations convert the enthusiasm for public service into a renewed interest in

government service? Answers to these questions will inform both the practice and the teaching of human resource management for years to come, and will contribute to the ongoing effort to make the human resource management function in government more strategic, more forward-thinking, and more effective.

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