

Poor to Good: The Implications of Diverse Performance Contexts
For Improving Public Policy and Management Research

By

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“...A government ill executed, whatever may be its theory, must be, in practice, a bad government.” -- Alexander Hamilton, Federalist No. 70.

Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to highlight and question important conceptual assumptions made by most public management research and to argue for a normative shift in its focus. In the first part of the analysis, I discuss when management should not matter by analyzing the conceptual and empirical implications of the “performance context” in which management operates. I also analyze the common assumption in management research that the relationship between management and performance is linear. In discussing the different relationships that can exist between management and performance I highlight the conceptual and empirical significance of the “management profile” for developing theory and selecting methods. The second part of the paper discusses the importance of developing a better understanding of the nature and causes of poor management quality in public organizations. The conceptual and empirical analyses from the first part of the paper inform this discussion.

I conclude the paper with a discussion of the implications of my analysis for improving theory and method in public management research. I also argue that public management research should focus on understanding how we can get public agencies from poor to good in contrast to the current focus on going from good to great. The reasoning for this argument comes from not only a review of the literature and some of my own empirical research, but also from my experiences as a performance auditor in Ohio seeing first-hand the negative impact of poor management on citizens.

Part I: Improving Research on the Management-Performance Connection

Researchers' assumptions about the theoretical relationships between variables under study have a direct impact on the methods they employ, the findings that result, and the interpretation of those findings. Conversely, the methods used to analyze a phenomenon assume the relationships between variables are of a certain nature, even if the researcher has not explicitly identified this assumption. In this first section, I discuss two important conceptual assumptions typically made, either explicitly or implicitly, by public management researchers about the management-performance (M-P) relationship. I also assess the empirical implications and analytical limitations of these assumptions. The two assumptions are 1) management always matters for performance and 2) the management-performance relationship is linear.

Management Always Matters?

Perhaps by the very nature of our research interests, management researchers almost always assume that management impacts performance and if we have good quality data and employ the right methods we can reveal the connection. In some contexts, it is reasonable to assume a strong M-P relationship, but in other contexts this is likely to not a sound assumption. Researchers need to give more attention to the performance context in which management operates, when selecting cases to analyze, in developing hypotheses about the M-P relationship, and when interpreting the empirical findings.

As I define it, the performance context is determined by the difficulty of the task faced by a public organization and the political environment in which the organization operates. It seems likely that in certain technically complicated and/or highly political performance environments, management may have little or no impact on performance. Matland (1995) offers a useful framework for identifying such situations (see Table 1). Matland developed the Ambiguity-Conflict model for categorizing implementation contexts and it seems relevant to thinking about

the likely impact of management in certain idealized contexts. According to Matland (1995), the level of understanding or ambiguity about the technical means for achieving a particular policy goal and the level of political disagreement or conflict surrounding the desirability of the goal is important for understanding what form implementation will take. When means are well understood and the goal is not controversial management should be a key factor, along with resource levels, for determining performance.

Table 1: Matland’s Ambiguity Conflict Framework

		Conflict	
		Low	High
Ambiguity	Low	<i>Administrative Context</i> Strong Management-Performance Connection	<i>Political Context</i> Limited or Inconsistent Management-Performance Connection
	High	<i>Experimental Context</i> Limited or Inconsistent Management-Performance Connection	<i>Symbolic-Interaction Context</i> No Management-Performance Connection

Source: Adapted from Matland (1995)

In what Matland terms an *administrative* implementation context (or what I call the performance context), good management should be free to employ its resources to address well understood problems and effectively produce desired outcomes. Maintaining highway infrastructure in good condition is a model example of an administrative implementation context since it is primarily a well understood and largely apolitical engineering task and so should be highly within the control of management. Management quality has been found to positively impact condition outcomes in the state maintained bridges (Heckman, 2008).

In the *political* implementation or performance context, means are well understood, but goals are highly controversial and contested. In such a context, a well managed agency may know how to effectively employ technical methods to achieve particular outcomes, but they are likely to be significantly hampered from doing so, due to the highly controversial nature of the

goal. Opponents of contested policy goals will work to limit resources and constrain the authority of agencies in various ways in order to prevent the achievement of the goals (Moe, 1989). If opponents of the controversial policy are effective, then good management may have a limited or inconsistent impact on performance outcomes. Jas & Skelcher (2005) note such a phenomenon in the U.K. where some local governments may have be well managed in terms of corporate or administrative functions, but do not produce good performance outcomes because core service functions are not effective.

Another example of a political performance context is air pollution control policy in the United States. There exist relatively well understood technical solutions for reducing pollution, such as limiting economic activity, requiring certain production methods, and raising the cost of certain activities through taxes, but often state environmental agencies are limited in their ability to employ effective technical solutions. These limitations arise from industry groups and elected officials worried about economic growth and constituent dissatisfaction with environmental programs require too much in the way of cost or lifestyle changes. As a result, researchers should expect that the M-P relationship to be inconsistent across states with a weak or non-existent relationship in states with strong industry interest groups and conservative populations. Heckman (2008) found support for this notion in as study of the impact of state management quality on air pollution outcomes for certain industrial source pollutants. Heckman found no relationship between state management quality and air pollution outcomes.

Researchers also should not expect a consistent or significant relationship in the last two implementation situations or performance contexts. In the *experimental* context, the technical means for achieving a problem are totally unknown. Therefore, there is no well understood approach to producing the desired policy goals. As a result, there should be wide variation in management approaches to producing outcomes as agencies try different unproven experimental

approaches. In such cases, good management will pursue a trial and error strategy that by its very nature will not be consistently related to particular performance outcomes, particularly across agencies with similar goals.

In a *symbolic- interactive* performance context, the means for achieving the goal are poorly understood and the goal is highly contested. In such cases, good management will not know how to produce desired outcomes and likely will not even be permitted to experiment in any effective fashion since political conflict and relatively weak and shifting coalitions likely will prevent any consistent and sustained action on the problem. For example, Jas & Skelcher's (2005) longitudinal analysis of 15 local governments in the U.K. found that performance will be disrupted when political leadership is volatile, inconsistent, or opposed to management efforts. In fact, good management may be defined more by the ability to manage political conflict and preserve itself rather than produce performance outcomes in such a performance context.

Overall, applying Matland's Ambiguity-Conflict model suggests that there may be many performance contexts in which management should not be expected to have a systematic or significant impact on performance. It is an empirical question as to how the common administrative performance context is versus the other contexts, but all the contexts seem likely to exist. It seems likely that administrative context may be one of the least common given the complexity of many public problems and the contested nature of many policy issues. Regardless, it seems critical that public management researchers should carefully evaluate the performance context of the situation when selecting cases in which to examine the performance-management relationship, in defining and measuring good management and performance, and in formulating hypotheses about the expected M-P relationship.

When researchers are studying the M-P relationship in performance context in which they do expect a significant, and consistent M-P relationship, there is still a question as to the nature

of relationship. The next section of the paper analyzes the potential relationships researchers might expect between management and performance and under what circumstances these different relationships are likely to occur.

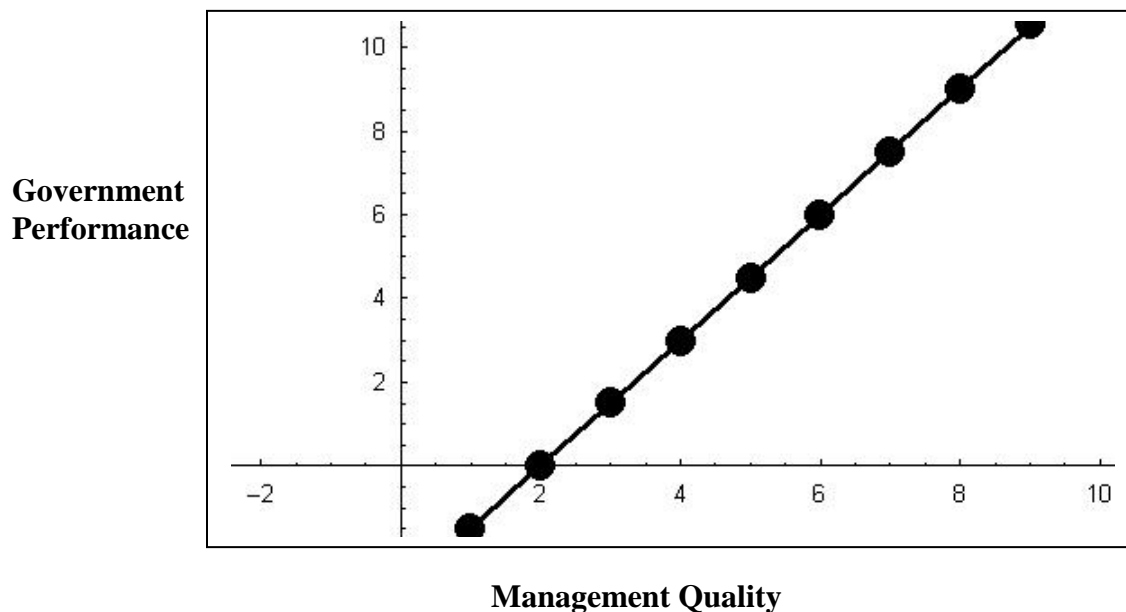
The Management-Performance Relationship is Linear?

While theoretical pieces often have noted that the management and performance relationship is likely “autoregressive, contingent, and non-linear” (e.g., Meier & O’Toole, 2004), empirical research into the management and performance relationship predominately uses OLS regression or other quantitative methods that assume a linear relationship. Either implicitly or explicitly researchers using such methods are assuming the M-P relationship should be consistently linear (Gill & Meier, 2000). In many cases this assumption may be accurate and many studies using methods based on the linearity assumption have shown a relationship between management and performance (Boyne, Meier, O’Toole, & Walker, 2005).

However, in many cases the linearity assumption is likely to be incorrect and will not reveal the relationship or understate its magnitude. To avoid missing the M-P connection in such cases researchers need to consider management quality profile (MQP) of the case(s) under study. The MQP of an individual agency refers to the current quality of its management (e.g., poor, good, or excellent) and its quality improvement trajectory (e.g., improving, declining, steady state) ((Jas & Skelcher, 2005). The MQP for multiple cases refers to the dispersion of the different levels of management quality within the sample or population. There is no precise terminology for the MQP, but one way would be to evaluate management quality as poor, good, or excellent. Therefore, if high performing agencies have been selected for study, then the MQP likely ranges from good to excellent in the case(s) to be studied. On the other hand, if the researcher is examining an entire population or agencies with diverse performance results, then the MQP is likely diverse and includes cases of all three types.

The ubiquitous use of linear models in management research suggests that management researchers almost always expect that improvements in management should result in proportional improvements in performance regardless of the MQP of the organizations under study (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Linear Management–Performance Relationship

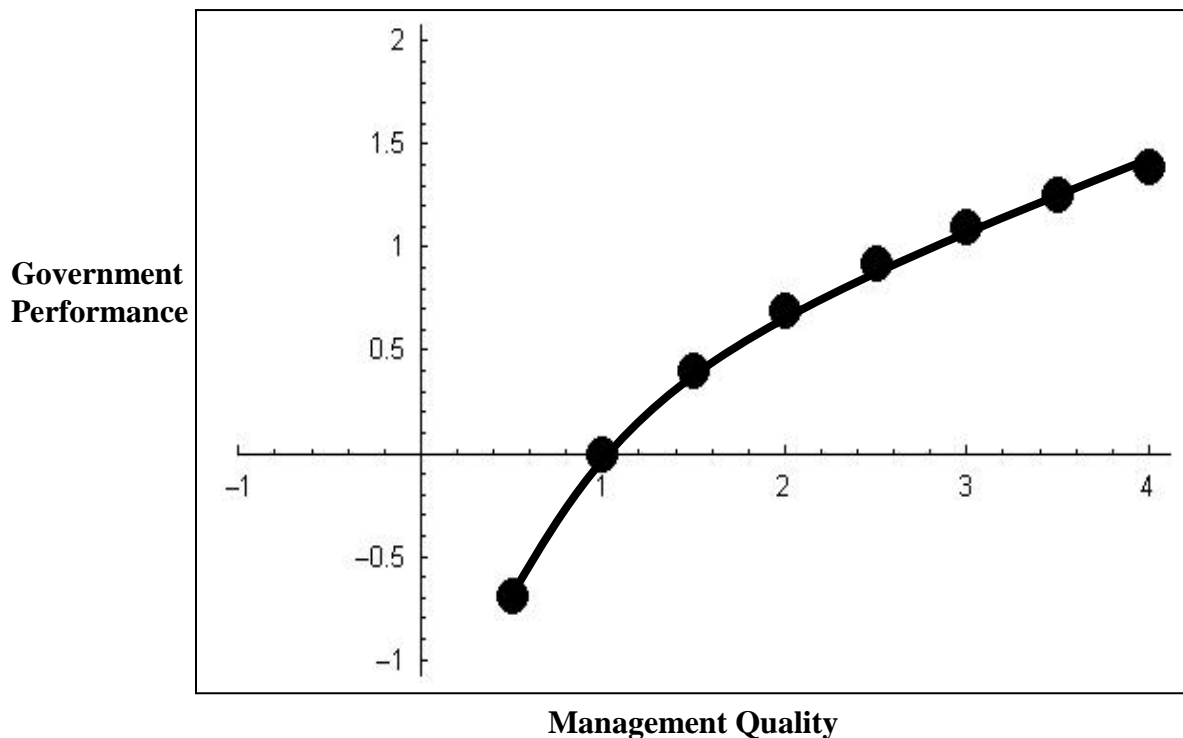


The linearity assumption means that the benefits of improving management will produce similar benefits regardless of the MPQ of the organization(s) analyzed. Assuming an administrative performance context, it may be true for certain simple tasks that, regardless of the MQP of an agency, a one unit of improvement in management quality will produce a proportional increase in performance.¹ However, it is unclear what types tasks should be expected to produce such a linear relationship. It does seem certain that there are many tasks required to achieve particular goals in which the M-P relationship will not be linear. In such cases, taking into account the MQP of the sample or population will be important for developing appropriate hypotheses and selecting methods.

¹I make use here of Wilson's (1989) notion that task difficulty impacts bureaucratic performance outcomes.

Even with simple tasks the M-P relationship may not be strictly linear. For instance, some tasks required to achieve particular outcomes may be of such a low level of difficulty that there may be a point at which improving quality above a certain level may produce diminishing or no performance gains (Heckman, 2008). In such cases, management and performance would have a logarithmic relationship (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: Logarithmic Management–Performance Relationship

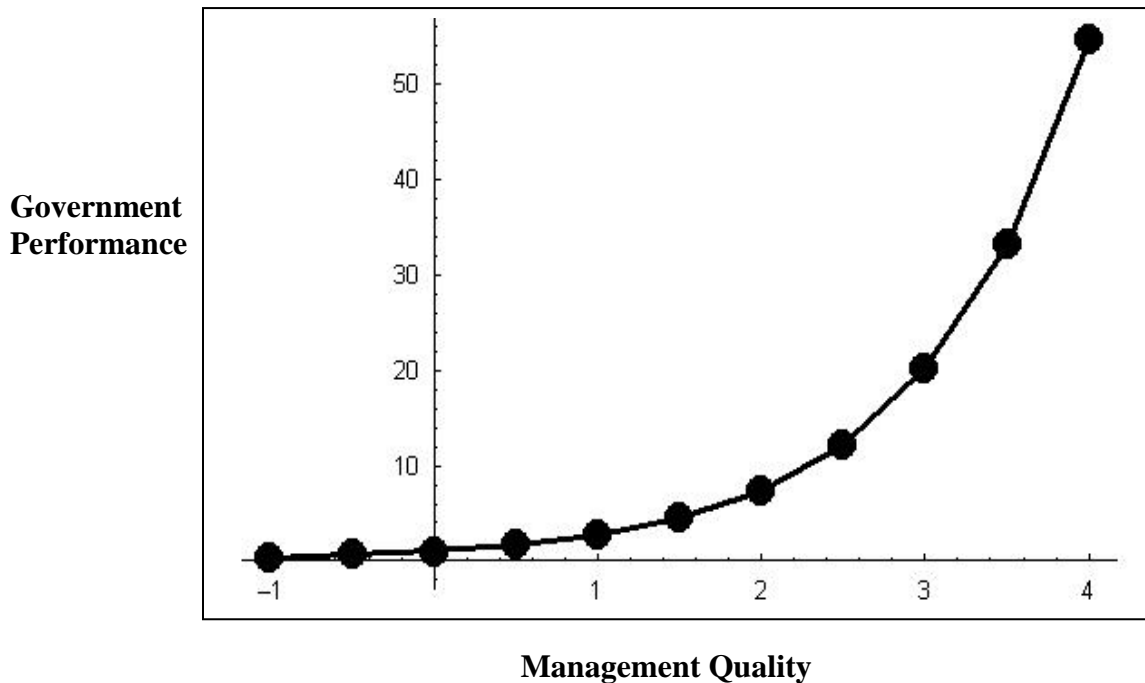


Employing a linear method in such cases will produce findings that show a weak or non-existent relationship between management and performance. Therefore, when a logarithmic relationship exists, the quantitative results and their interpretation should be significantly impacted by the MQP of the sample or population being studied.

The assumption of a linear M-P relations is also likely inaccurate in the opposite case where there is a high level task difficulty in the means required to achieve particular outcomes. In such cases agencies with poor management may see little or no gain in performance until

management quality improves to some basic level of competence. In such cases, the M-P relationship should best be stepwise or exponential (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Exponential Management–Performance Relationship



When task difficulty is moderate or high and the sample has a diverse or relatively poor MQP a linear analytical method, such as OLS regression, is not the most appropriate for assessing the M-P relationship. Instead, a non-linear method should be used or, at least, the analysis using a linear method should be enhanced using substantively weighted analytical techniques (SWAT). For example, Gill & Meier (2001) have employed substantively weighted least squares (SWLS) techniques to enhance linear regression analysis and highlight the differential benefits of management of different quality levels on education outcomes. In their analysis, schools with high level performance got more benefit from resources and were able to better overcome environmental constraints than schools with good performance. The results of the study suggest that the overall M-P relationship may have been exponential.

However, Gill & Meier were likely able to find such a relationship because they chose to focus their analysis on high performing schools. The M-P relationship on the upper portion of the

exponential curve is largely linear. Because Meier & O'Toole focused the differential impact of going from good to great management their use of linear regression for the base analysis produced significant results to compare against. However, their overall base OLS analysis may understate the general M-P relationship in schools since the overall relationship is likely exponential.

Conclusion

The conceptual analysis and empirical examples referenced in this part of the paper indicate the importance performance context and the management quality profile into account when conducting research into the impact of management on performance. The nature of the empirical relationship, if any, one should expect between management quality and performance outcomes will vary depending upon the performance context and MQP of the sample or population. These issues should be considered when selecting cases to study, developing research hypotheses, and when selecting methods for studying the impact of management on agency performance. While this analysis provided insights into the likelihood and nature of and M-P connection, it did not address the relative value of the costs and benefits of improving management at different points on the M-P curve. The next part of the paper addresses this issue and its normative implications for public management research.

Part II: Improving the Contribution of Management Research to the Public Good

This part of the paper discusses the need for more research into the nature and causes of poor management in public organizations, particularly “incompetent” or “permanently failing” organizations (Ott & Shafritz, 1994; Meyer & Zucker, 1989). I discuss how the nature of incompetent organizations is such that they likely cannot improve without assistance from external actors who can provide the necessary insights, capacity, and motivation to improve.

However, such assistance is unlikely to be effective without scholarly research into the

nature and causes of poor management that leads to incompetence and failing performance. Therefore, I conclude this part of the paper with a discussion of why research into the nature and causes of poor management in incompetent organizations is critical for advancing the public interest and should be a primary focus of public management scholars.

As detailed in the prior analysis, the methods employed by public management researchers basically provide insight into “the average” case. When not focused on the average case, public management research has focused its attention on “excellent” organizations and how to move management and performance from good to great (Gill & Meier, 2001; Kettl, 2005). It is not entirely clear why this is so, but in part it seems mirror the focus in research on private organizations (Collins, 2001; Peters & Waterman, 2004).

One impact of the focus on excellence in management research is that research into what Ott & Shafritz (1994) term incompetent organizations and Meyer and Zucker (1989) term permanently failing organizations has been neglected (Berman & West, 2003; Ott & Shafritz, 1994). This is not necessarily a critical issue in the private sector where poorly managed organizations are likely to either change or decline and be eliminated by competition from the market. However, in the public sector it is much less likely that poor performing organizations will be forced to improve or be eliminated. Therefore, it seems more important that public management research should focus on understanding the nature and causes of poor management quality in public organizations and generate insights into how poorly managed organizations can be improved (Ott & Shafritz, 1994). The existing private and public management research into failing organizations sheds some light on the challenges to improving the management of such organizations.²

² Most of research into declining or failing organizations examines private sector organizations.

Incompetent Organizations Need our Help!

While there is a relatively extensive private sector literature on organizational failure and turn around, it is of limited relevance for public organizations because many of causes and solutions to poor management and performance in the private sector do not apply to public sector organizations (Mellahi & Wilkinson, 2004). For example, two of the main strategies identified for helping management turn around failing private organizations are retrenchment and repositioning. Retrenchment involves reducing activities or operations and exiting from particular markets. A public agency could rarely exit from a market, although it might be possible to partner with other organizations or shift some responsibilities to other agencies. Repositioning involves changing the organization's mission, core activities, and markets. Again, public agencies are not likely to be able to dramatically change missions, markets, or duties. If these were determined to be the best approaches to improving a failing public organization these strategies would external support and approval (Walshe, Gill, Hyde, & Pandit, 2004).

The most feasible strategy identified in the private management literature for helping public sector organizations is reorganization or changing the internal management systems or other internal aspects of the organization. However, the nature of public organizations and the environment they face are different enough from private organizations that lessons from the research into private sector organizations will not always be applicable. For example, replacing top management or changing human resources processes are common strategies for turning around failing organizations. Yet, it often will be much more difficult make wholesale management changes and reforms to human resource practices due to civil service restrictions (Walshe, et al., 2004).

Additionally, the available research indicates that poorly managed organizations are unlikely to effectively change their internal organization in ways that improve management and

performance. For organizations to improve performance, they must recognize a performance problem and have the capacity to change to improve performance. Poorly managed agencies continually misread, mismanage, and fail to adapt to changes in the environment. They also often ignore important actors and elements in the environment that provide important cues about performance and the need to change. Rather than reading external pressure as motivation to improve, poor performing organizations often begin to focus on organizational persistence rather than performance when organizational members feel threatened (Jas & Skelcher, 2005). Incompetent agencies that face external pressure in response to poor management and performance often experience further performance declines as a result of internal instability and external sanctions.

Also, incompetent organizations often do not believe they can improve and do not have the internal capacity to know how to improve (Turner, Skelcher, Whiteman, Hughes, & Jas, 2004; Ford, Ford & McNamara, 2002). The most extreme examples of this phenomenon are what Ford et al. (2002) calls “cynical” and “resigned organizations.” The management in a “cynical organization” blames external forces for the poor performance of the organization. The “system” is perceived as the problem and failure is inevitable because the external environment is fixed and unchangeable. Therefore, poor performance is accepted as an inevitable result of a bad system. This belief can become a self-fulfilling prophecy as the failure to respond to the environment results in reduced political support and resources that cause further decline in performance.

“Resigned” organizations recognize a need to change, but see the organization as incompetent and unable to change. The organization is viewed as fatally flawed and failure is deemed inevitable. Organizational members long for success, but are apathetic and hopeless. Members of resigned organizations exhibit low morale, lack of focus and follow through, and

non-participation. Poor performance is accepted as an inevitable result of the way the organization is (Ford, et al., 2002; Turner et al., 2004). As a result sanctions or other pressure will not usually be sufficient to motivate reforms in incompetent organizations.

Even when motivated to want to change, incompetent organizations typically lack the capacity – they lack the institutional knowledge, management skill and/or other intangible and tangible resources to reform and put themselves on a positive performance trajectory. Therefore, incompetent organizations require external assistance to both to motivate action and to provide the necessary capacity to improve their management and subsequent performance. Public management research could generate findings that are useful to policy makers and practitioners trying to turn around incompetent organizations and improve poor management.

Advancing the Public Interest through “Poor to Good” Research

Unfortunately, the existing research also indicates that the investments required for improving poorly managed agencies may be significant and less certain to produce improvement than investments into agencies with good management. This fact may suggest the focus on good to great in management research is appropriate given the costs and benefits. I argue the opposite point in this section.

In some cases, the cost-benefit analysis alone may be sufficient to demonstrate this point. Referring to the analysis in part one, if the management-performance relationship is logarithmic then research that can be used to help a poorly managed agency become good should provide greater benefits than helping a well managed agency become excellent. Therefore, a greater research investment may be justified purely by the additional benefit gained (depending of course on the value of the additional benefit). In cases of a linear relationship it would seem that the benefits are the same regardless of the agencies MQP – a one unit increase in management quality will produce a one unit increase in performance. In this case the cost-benefit would seem

to indicate that investing into research in well managed organizations is most efficient. I disagree for two main reasons: 1) Much of the gains from improving management in effective organizations would likely occur without such research and 2) improving poor management in incompetent public organizations is much more important and valuable than improving good management in effective organizations.

First, competent or well managed organizations will be able to achieve much of the performance gains without research insights. Competent organizations are able to scan effectively scan their environment for cues about performance and work proactively to develop a supportive environment by maintaining an attentive relationship with oversight officials and seeking sufficient delegation of authority and autonomy to carry out the organization's mission (Rainey and Steinbauer, 1999). Well managed organizations also have effectively functioning organizational learning systems to diagnose performance problems and the capacity to make the required changes to management systems to improve performance (Reschenthaler & Thompson, 1998). By their nature, well managed organizations have the motivation and capacity to learn and improve without direct external intervention or assistance from scholarly research. Additionally, poor performing agencies with poor management will need assistance that is qualitatively different from the assistance that relatively well managed agencies will need. Therefore, research into competent and excellent organizations is unlikely to generate insights that will also be applicable for improving incompetent organizations (Eitel, 2004).

Second, I contend that increasing the performance of an incompetent organization has a much greater value than increasing the performance of good management in effective organizations. Improving a poorly managed organization to a good or competent level would mean good or average performance outcomes for citizens rather than poor or negative outcomes. In contrast, improving a well managed organization will mean citizens already benefiting from

good performance will see superior performance. This has a significant qualitatively different impact on the affected citizens.

While improving well managed agencies is beneficial, reducing the number of poorly managed agencies seems essential to the public good. Citizens are entitled to at least competent or mediocre management³ that can provide a basic minimum level of performance. While mediocre management may not excel and will miss opportunities to improve, it does deliver a basic quality of service and performance that citizens are owed (Berman & West, 2003). Government that is incompetent and produces poor or negative outcomes cannot maintain its legitimacy. While excellent management is highly desirable and can produce dramatic benefits in certain performance contexts (i.e., administrative and exponential), but is not essential for having an effectively functioning government that meets the minimum standards of legitimacy (Ott & Shafritz, 1994).

This normative argument is particularly important if an exponential M-P relationship exists since, all else equal, improving a well managed organization will produce greater benefits for a one unit increase in management quality. Conversely, improving poor management may produce little benefit when the relationship is exponential. From that perspective, the blind cost benefit might always favor researching well managed organizations since the resource investment is likely to be less and the benefits more certain. Still, I argue that helping poorly managed agencies improve should still be the priority because the first priority of government should be to improve poor management. Citizens are owed, at least, competent management and performance from public agencies.

³Berman & West (2003) define “managerial mediocrity” as a “modest commitment to the contemporary values and practices of public administration.”

Conclusion

The overall goal of my presentation was to help improve public management research by raising fundamental questions about how we approach our research. The main premise of this piece has been that the public management research has typically been based upon key conceptual and normative assumptions that have caused it to employ certain methods and focus on particular types of agencies. These assumptions have limited our ability to generate useful insights that produce the greatest benefit for policy makers, management practitioners, and the public interest. To improve public management research we need to take into account the performance context of our studies and the management quality profile of the sample or population under study, with focus on understanding poor rather than excellent management.

Different performance contexts have differing implications for the expected relationship between management and performance and the methods that should be used. The complexity of the performance context is defined by technical difficulty of meeting a particular performance outcome and the political conflict surrounding the goal. In a simple performance context, an agency may be charged with achieving a well-defined, technically feasible, and relatively noncontroversial goal. In such cases the management performance connection should be strong and linear. In a complicated context an agency would be faced with an ill-defined and controversial goal for which there is no well understood method for achieving the goal. In such cases, the management-performance relationship is likely non-existent. The likely costs and benefits of particular interventions to improve management quality will be determined, in part, by the interaction of the performance context and the management quality profile of the entities under study. The contingent and contextual nature of the M-P relationships suggests the need to use non-linear methods, SWAT techniques, and mixed methods to improve public management research. Also, careful consideration of the management quality profile of the organizations

being studied and the performance context in which they operate is critical for improving theory and method, for interpreting findings, and for generating useful guidance for policymakers and practitioners.

I also have argued that public management research which improves our understanding of how to improve incompetent public organizations is fundamental to advancing the public interest. Public management research has typically focused on the agencies with average and above management quality. If management always matters in a linear fashion then understanding the average and high performing cases may be sufficient for generating insights that also help improve poorly managed agencies. Unfortunately, this is unlikely to be the case. Whether an agency is poor, average, or excellent often will have a major impact on the relationship between M-P in and the costs and benefits of trying to improve that agency. Also, because the causes and remedies for poor management are likely qualitatively different than for good management, “good to great” type research will not produce the insights need to improve poor management and incompetent organizations.⁴ Additionally, incompetent organizations tend to persist in the public sector and can produce harm indefinitely and even great catastrophe. Citizens are entitled to, at least, average performing organizations with at least competent management. Yet, it is the poorly managed public organization that is least able to improve without external intervention.

Therefore, public interest is best served by a research agenda that emphasizes studies into the nature and causes of poor management. The public deserves and policy makers need research that generates more and better insights into how to improve poor performing and poorly managed public agencies. As Jas & Skelcher have written, “The rationale for this focus [on poor performing public organizations] is the inequalities in public welfare are more likely to be reduced in absolute terms by boosting the performance of these organizations rather than by

⁴Although certainly research into organizations at all levels of management quality is necessary if we are to generate generalizable insights (Bretschneider, Marc-Aurele & Wu, 2009).

seeking to increase the aggregate performance of the whole population.” I would add that improving poorly managed agencies will also improve public welfare more than to seeking to improve the performance of well managed organizations who likely can improve on their own without help from scholarly research. Producing research that generates insights for use by policy makers and practitioners about efficient and effective ways to improve poor management public organizations seems fundamental to the mission of public management scholarship. The public good is best advanced by a public management research agenda that focuses on how to move government management from poor to good rather than good to great.

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