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Accountability: The Foundation of Trust in Public Administration

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By John Duffy
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Accountability has different meanings for different people. Most public managers think of accountability in terms of holding an individual or department responsible for program success and failure. However, accountability is much more than serving out rewards and punishment, though this feature is an essential element. In this article, I explain why I believe public managers should focus more on accountability in their efforts to build public organizations that are responsive, responsible and equitable.

So, what do we mean by accountability? Boven, in his 2007 article, “Analyzing and assessing accountability: A conceptual framework,” defines accountability as actions characterized by their responsiveness, responsibility, integrity, effectiveness, efficiency, equity and transparency. His broad definition helps describe the important link between the profession and the wider political and social systems in which we work.

Administrative actions based in law, as well as implemented through adopted policies and procedures, are fundamental to accountable management. These requirements help safeguard the public from arbitrary and capricious actions. In addition, accountability requires that citizens and policy makers be able to identify a responsible party for an agency’s action. This requirement ensures that the bureaucracy is answerable to someone. Without this element, the bureaucracy is likely to become overly powerful because it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to identify individuals liable for poor or unethical decisions. Under such conditions, corruption may flourish.

In addition, when public administrators are held accountable, they are required to explain the rationale for their decisions. This aspect of accountability provides transparency for the decision making process, thereby allowing citizens, stakeholders and policy makers to understand how

decisions are made that may affect their daily lives. Transparency too sheds light on how public monies are spent. Transparency also makes it possible to determine if the decisions are fair and equitable.

Another central aspect of accountability is that public administrators are required to conduct their work in a moral manner, so that the greatest good is promoted. Indeed, most professional organizations for public administrators have codes of conduct that call for ethics, truthfulness and honesty in daily work. And when public administrators fail to meet these ethical standards, accountability requires an explanation for the failure, consequences for the responsible party and a requirement to correct the failure through some agreed upon adopted mechanisms.

Program evaluation and performance measurements have crucial roles in furthering accountability. Program evaluation is one way to assess an agency's performance by considering the merit of programs and their ability to achieve agreed upon goals. Performance measurement furthers accountability through its emphasis on program operations and results. Through performance measurements we gain insight into how efficient, effective and equitable an agency's programs are. These are all key elements of accountability.

Accountability, when conducted properly, also promotes organizational learning. Public administrators who seek to create successful agencies use accountability tools to identify both successes and failures and understand the reasons for these results. Knowing how a success was achieved or why a failure occurred provides information on what to replicate and what to avoid in the future.

When all of these aspects of accountability are pursued together, it becomes possible to build trusting relationships between public managers, the citizens and policy makers. Trusting relationships are crucial to effective public management because such relationships engender citizen confidence in their public institutions.

Because accountability is fundamental to good public administration, public managers should take actions to enhance it. These actions include:

- Clearly identifying responsible parties for all agency operations and programs.
- Using the information obtained through accountability efforts to hold people responsible for their actions.
- Being honest and transparent in people's actions and decisions.
- Involving stakeholders (citizens, policy makers and interested parties) in all phases of program development and implementation, including problem definition and solution generation.
- Using strategic planning to better understand future challenges and potential responses.
- Effectively using performance measurement to monitor programs to include trend analysis and benchmarking, and making adjustments when necessary.
- Regularly using program evaluation to determine if programs are actually needed, and if so, to ensure that their original purpose and theory of change meets the program's goals and objectives.

- Using accountability as a means to learn from success and failure in order to enhance overall organizational performance.

In closing, a focus on accountability allows for a broader and more comprehensive review of individual and organizational performance. Accountability, therefore, is more than issuing rewards and punishments. It is about creating truly responsive and responsible public agencies. Moreover, when public agencies are accountable, trustful relationships are built with citizens, stakeholders and policy makers. This is critical for success.

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