The Rise of Participatory Society: Challenges for Public Administration

Article

That the Twentieth Century was an era of profound social, political and economic change is now easily recognizable. What are not so apparent are the changes that are still rapidly occurring. One of the most important still-ongoing revolutions is the increasing call for participation by stakeholders in key decision-making processes in all areas of society—in popular culture, in business, in civil society, and in government. Together, these participatory developments are heralding an era of significant social change. A Participatory Society is on the horizon—and Public Administration must be ready for the transformation.

In the cultural sphere, people now create and publish their own books, movies and music, they customize orders on most restaurant meals, and blogging and other forms of “targeted media” have displaced mass media on the Internet and other forms of computer-mediated communications. In the world of business, shareholder revolts have skyrocketed, stakeholder analysis, self-employment, and stock ownership have steadily increased, organizational structures have flattened, and corporate democracy is beginning to take hold. In the civil society sector, participatory evaluation techniques have gained in popularity, grassroots social movements have flourished, the push for greater accountability has led grantmakers to have a greater say in the development of program outcomes, and several comprehensive web sites offer potential donors easy access to financial information on a large and growing number of charitable organizations. In government, sunshine laws, the devolution of power, shared decision-making, and citizen satisfaction surveys are becoming ever more commonplace. And in the realm of politics, key elements of “direct democracy,” including citizen ballot initiatives, recalls, all-mail ballots, open primaries, campaign contribution limits, and supermajority and voter-approved rules for tax increases have all become increasingly popular.

What links these seemingly unconnected developments is that they collectively point to a generalized surge in participatory practices, values, and mores in the industrialized countries of the world. Behind the push for participation is an array of structural and value changes—most notably increasing levels of education, the rise of the Internet and sophisticated telecommunications systems, the spread of “postmaterialist” value orientations, and the growing speed, scope and scale of commercial, organizational, and inter-personal transactions—that have over the past several decades been setting the stage for the transformation. Together, these developments have effectively generated the pre-requisites for the emergence of a highly participative society: we now have the societal capacity to successfully engage in participatory practices; we have the appropriate technology to facilitate complex, open organizational decision-making processes; and we have the underlying philosophy and values that justify and demand stakeholder participation. Moreover, we now also have a critical mass of initial evidence from pioneers in the public, private and nonprofit fields that says participatory decision-making processes can work.

In short, over the past several decades, a web of technological, economic, cultural, and socio-demographic forces of social change have been busy laying the groundwork upon which participatory structures and processes can feasibly thrive. Yet hierarchical, archaic organizational structures and decision-making processes—perfectly suited for the old industrial era—remain the norm. There is, effectively, a growing incongruity between the hierarchical organizational structures and decision-making processes that are currently predominant and the new underlying structural conditions. Such lags between structural changes and societal transformations are normal. As social change theory instructs, instead of arriving in a steady drip, change tends to come in waves, especially when the growing de-alignment between
underlying structural conditions and extant social, political and organizational realities forces a “structural adjustment” that brings the two back into alignment. We are on the verge of just such a re-alignment now—one that is ushering in a new participatory age.

Both the growing values-based demand for participation and the ever-increasing amount of actual participatory processes will transform prevailing social, political, and organizational structures. The challenges for anyone in a position of power in public, private, and nonprofit organizations will be significant. The most fundamental change will be the need to devolve decision-making authority to a broader and broader group of stakeholders; the “organizational selectorate,” or the set of people who have the right to participate in strategic decisions, will essentially widen and deepen.

What does this mean for Public Administration? At the disciplinary or sectoral level, organizational change is imminent precisely because the decision-making structures and processes that are currently predominant in the public and nonprofit sectors are not in line with the underlying value changes and structural conditions that are fueling the demand for participation. As dynamic organizations will develop a variety of successful adaptive strategies, the widening and deepening of the decision-making process will ultimately manifest itself in any number of different forms—ranging from the devolution of powers, collaborative management strategies, horizontal organizational structures, democratic board governance, and “clubhouse” organizational models to the use of stakeholder advisory groups, “Future Search” conferences, and “Open Space” technology. No matter the specific format, all organizations will be forced to adapt.

A primary consequence of the growing demand for participation is that organizations and venues without satisfactory, genuine, participatory processes will see their market share, participation rates, and/or customer satisfaction levels decline. In the nonprofit sector, this is already evident in the much-lamented decline of “traditional” civil society organizations such as the PTA, 4-H, and the Elks, Moose, and Kiwanis. It is also discernible in the decline of several traditional religious organizations and the rise of the most decentralized forms of religious congregations. Politically, the corrosion of electoral participation is, paradoxically, also explicable by the rise of a Participatory Society. As Peter Drucker cogently argues in his 1999 book *Management Challenges for the 21st Century,* because political decision-making has become too representative and abstract, contemporary citizenship now occurs primarily through the social sector. Participants want to be heard and help make decisions and, as it stands, the social sector is where the action is.

There will also be a significant impact on public and nonprofit management at the individual level. Are you a leader or manager who typically engages in “false participation,” believes in a top-down hierarchical approach, or routinely hides information from your subordinates? Do you shield yourself from your employees and customers with a layer of bureaucracy? Do you serve on a nonprofit or private sector board that does not disclose salary information of top managers? Do you regularly develop policies without engaging key stakeholders? Do you lack trust in your employees to make good decisions? Do you survey clients or employees only to justify a decision you’ve already made, rather than to obtain quality input? Do you believe that your primary task is to develop the “best” policy option, and then try to convince people of that option’s worth? If so, you’ll be doing you and your organization a disservice. As the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-NY) once counseled, “Stubborn opposition to proposals often has no other basis than the complaining question, ‘Why wasn’t I consulted?’” In the Participatory Society, all managers must take this wisdom to heart by learning to adapt to an increasingly participatory strategic environment.
In the end, just as the Twentieth Century saw government and society change to incorporate a mobilized populace, the Twenty-First will see it adapt to a participatory populace. While we can't know the ultimate form this participatory future will assume, we do know that people will want to participate in areas where they are capable and passionate—and these areas are rapidly expanding. Though citizens will not care to participate everywhere, managers must everywhere be prepared to accommodate participatory demands by opening up and facilitating the decision-making process. A critical challenge for MPA programs will thus be to prepare graduates to lead and succeed in the emerging participatory era.

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