

**STRENGTHENING THE THREE-LEGGED STOOL OF POLICY  
ANALYSIS, ORGANIZATION, AND LEADERSHIP**

Isabel V. Sawhill

To discuss these three articles is to walk into a lion's den of fundamental controversies and tensions that underlie all of public policy. Analysis, organization, and management could be viewed as the three legs of our profession. The issue is not which leg is most important but how each supports the stool as a whole. The authors of these articles would, I'm sure, acknowledge as much. Nevertheless, each has been willing to play devil's advocate for a particular point of view. The result has been a fascinating and instructive debate.

### Three Complementary Emphases

Let me start with the Brandl argument. He accepts the now-popular notion that government is often unproductive. The problem, he says, has nothing to do with policymaking. It has everything to do with the behavior of individuals in government bureaucracies. Nothing guarantees that such individuals will act to advance the mission of their agencies rather than their own self-interest. The result is shirking, withholding of information, and other inefficient or subversive activities about which citizens complain. Two mechanisms exist to bring bureaucrats' behavior more into line with their agencies' missions: incentives and inspiration. The literature thus far has focused almost entirely on the former—that is, on economic incentives. Brandl suggests that inspiration may be equally if not more important. But how does one inspire? Brandl does not elaborate, and he thus leaves us in suspense (at least until he finishes his book). He does suggest, though, that one way to motivate people is through leadership.

This brings me to Behn's argument. It is a fine example of using the case method to prove what cannot be proved in any other way. Leadership is all, says Behn, after walking us through his cases. His is a convincing presentation, and right after reading it, I'm solidly in his corner. All we have to do is clone the Ira Jacksons and the Charles Atkinses of the world. On further reflection, however, two problems occur to me. One is that I don't know much about cloning. And the second is that, even if I did, the results might be disappointing. Atkins was a top official in the Dukakis campaign. We now know the results of the campaign. Which Charles Atkins "case" results am I to believe: the "ET Choices" case or the Dukakis campaign case? I am especially concerned given that the success of the ET Choices program, and the reasons for that success, have not been documented. How do I know that welfare recipients are not leaving the rolls because of low unemployment in the state, rather than because of Atkins's transforming leadership? In short, I want a little more analysis.

Enter Quigley and Scotchmer. From their clever title, one thinks, they are going to argue that organizations and leadership count less than analysis. I'm eager to hear this argument. I imagine that they will tell us that one good piece of analysis can have more impact on social welfare than a million Ira Jacksoms. More formally: that the expected marginal social value of more investment in analysis is much greater than the expected marginal value of greater investment in understanding organizations and their leaders. But no. For most of the article, they instead tackle a strawman—the argument that a leader's hunches or a bureaucracy's imperatives are better bases for decision making than careful analysis. But neither Behn nor Brandl has ever argued such a position. Their position is that analysis is necessary for good outcomes, but not sufficient. Put a little differently, choosing policies is necessary but not sufficient. Those policies must be sold and implemented. In fact, Quigley and Scotchmer give us case after case where the analytically correct policy for achieving some objective is known but has not been adopted politically. It is this political gap, and its first cousin, the implementation gap, that cries out for more analysis—not the policy alternatives themselves. So I imagine Brandl and Behn would argue. And I would agree.

So far, in reacting to each article, I have ducked the larger questions posed by all three. So let me now provide some more general comments. First, the Brandl–Behn views of the world are not all that different. They contrast more with the analytical view than with each other. Second, their views are, in my opinion a healthy antidote to more conventional approaches. We as a profession have become preoccupied with analysis. This is not to say that analysis is unimportant—only that we may have run it into the ground.

But before we jump on the Brandl–Behn bandwagon, as interesting as it is, let's consider some of the difficulties.

The first problem is that current thinking about organization and about leadership is far less systematic than thinking about how to do good policy analysis. Policy analysis is well grounded in microeconomic theory. Scholarship about leadership and organization seems ungrounded in much of anything. In making such a statement, I may be showing my own ignorance, but neither paper has enlightened me on this front. As an earlier "Insight" put it, "conducting a literature search in this area is more like joining a fruit of the month club than like enlisting in a quest for enduring truths."<sup>1</sup>

I have dipped into the literature on leadership myself—having edited a book this year with that much overused word in its title.<sup>2</sup> What I found was pretty much a wasteland. John Gardner is a very wise man, but his writing on this topic has no bite. James MacGregor Burns is much better because he tries to relate leadership to the literature on developmental psychology in an interesting, and to me somewhat convincing, way. Indeed, if we are to pursue these issues further we will all need a much better grounding in psychology.<sup>3</sup> I have never doubted that Kenneth Boulding was right when he said the economist's indifference curve was immaculately conceived. But if preferences can be shaped by leadership or other factors, we need to understand how.

A second problem with jumping on the organization bandwagon is that it is either a profound indictment of our entire economic and social system or else it is a very manageable problem. Let me explain. The issue turns on whether there are important differences between public and private organizations. If, on the one hand, we assume that private organizations are more

efficient than public ones for some reason, then the solution would be to combine *public* financing with *private* delivery of services. Proposals to do so are legion, including everything from education vouchers to the contracting out of prison services or garbage collection.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, if we assume that private organizations are just as inefficient or poorly led as public ones, then we are talking about a major overhaul of all of our institutions—not just those in the public sector. My own guess is that the variation within each sector is just as large as the variation between them.<sup>5</sup> If so, we are talking about nothing more or less complicated than how to motivate people to be more productive. That's a tall order.

### Toward Synthesis

Can one synthesize these perspectives? Two recent papers have observed that, in comparison to the older area of public administration, the newer field of public policy analysis and management treats bureaucrats and other officials more as decision makers and less as passive agents.<sup>6</sup> This shift flows directly from the microeconomic paradigm of choice. People have options which should be weighed against a variety of criteria so rational action can be taken.

But is this more active view realistic? Can even the most junior member of the team be so empowered? At a psychological level, I think the answer is yes. My thesis is that ineffective organizations give people no real choices. Without choices, they become bored and lose the sense of personal efficacy that is essential for self-esteem and energetic action. Managers or administrators who simply give orders or set up repetitive systems fail to understand this. True leaders, by contrast, help to define and articulate the criteria to guide individual choices. These criteria can be very demanding as long as they are consonant with people's personal values. And when a group adopts these values, mainly as a result of their successful articulation by a good leader, they can also create Brandl's sense of community.

In conclusion, I am left with precisely the tension I began with: The left-hand side of my brain tells me that analysis and its lessons are logical, rational, and academically respectable. Its right-hand side tells me that organization and leadership are important even if their workings are as yet only dimly intuited. I salute those who are listening to their right brains and, at some academic risk, have begun researching these little-understood areas. We all stand to benefit in the long run from their efforts.

*ISABEL V. SAWHILL is a Senior Fellow at The Urban Institute, where she heads the Center on Changing Domestic Priorities; she is also the immediate past president of the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management*

### NOTES

1. John K. Clemons, "Classical Management Strategies for Public Administrators," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 5 (Winter 1986): 373–377, p. 373.
2. Isabel V. Sawhill, ed., *Challenge to Leadership* (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute Press, 1988).

3. This is a point that Richard Darman made when he spoke at APPAM's annual research conference in 1987.
4. See generally Janet Rothenberg Pack *et al.* "Privatization: Theory and Practice," (symposium issue) *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 6 (Summer 1987): 523–696.
5. Martha Wagner Weinberg, for one, agrees. See "Public Management and Private Management: A Diminishing Gap?" *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 3 (Fall 1983): 107–115.
6. Donald E. Stokes, "Political and Organizational Analysis in the Policy Curriculum," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 6 (Fall 1986): 45–55; and Richard F. Elmore, "Graduate Education in Public Management: Working the Seams of Government," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 6 (Fall 1986): 69–83.