

David H. Rosenbloom

American University and City University of Hong Kong

Public Sector Human Resource Management in 2020

Part III: Public Organizations of the Future

Historically at the federal level in the United States, public sector human resource management (HRM), traditionally called public personnel administration, has been driven largely by the ideology of the dominant political party, movement, or coalition. These ideologies incorporate images of what federal employees should be. From the founding in 1789 until 1829, federal employees were viewed as an extension of the socioeconomic elite that dominated national politics. For the Jacksonian Democrats who followed the Federalists and Jeffersonian Republicans, federal employees were an arm of the political party in control of the presidency. The civil service reformers of the 1870s and 1880s imagined federal employees as nonpartisan competent generalists with high moral standards. The Progressives, who followed, adhered to this image while seeking to transform civil servants' competence from general to technical through science. During the New Deal of the 1930s, the desire for technical competence was augmented at the upper levels with adherence to the president's policy objectives. In time, as the "imperial presidency" developed, the federal civil service increasingly was envisioned as an adjunct of the presidential administration in office.

Within all of these periods, there were undercurrents that supported alternative visions. For instance, the Jeffersonians articulated concepts that would make the federal service somewhat more representative in terms of social class background and, to some extent, partisan persuasion. With the possible exception of the elite period, each image left a lingering legacy (among others, see Mosher 1982; Riccucci and Naff 2007; Rosenbloom 1971; Van Riper 1958).

Today, however, there is no dominant image of the federal civil service, and political factions seek to inform the government's HRM with a variety of

values. These values are sometimes in tension or in competition with one another, and, consequently, there cannot be a coherent image, but at best a blurry one. As with many aspects of U.S. public administration, these values fall into clusters associated with management, politics, and law. The future of federal HRM will depend on whether a dominant political ideology arises and, if so, how it modifies, rejects, augments, and prioritizes these values. In the absence of such an ideology, federal HRM will remain an agglomeration of values temporarily elevated by one set of political interests or another. In other words, future HRM's path dependency will be missing a path.

Managerial Values

The chief value of the managerial cluster is cost-effectiveness, which rolls the civil service reformers' and the Progressives' emphasis on economy, efficiency, and effectiveness into one. Unsurprisingly, different political factions seek cost-effectiveness in different ways. Though President Ronald Reagan was unsuccessful in doing so, Reagan Republicans would downsize the federal civil service, thereby making cutback management a central facet of federal HRM. Many across the spectrum would follow President Jimmy Carter's effort to center federal HRM on performance, as promoted in pay-for-performance and performance management schemes. As reinventers, New Democrats sought cost-effectiveness through business values and techniques, including customer orientation, entrepreneurship, creating value, and better financial management. They decentralized and deregulated federal HRM, arguing that a one-size-fits-all model essentially fits nothing and certainly fails to link personnel functions to agency missions.

President George W. Bush viewed competitive sourcing as the key to cost-effectiveness. Like downsizing, this would put an emphasis on cutback management, but also would

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David H. Rosenbloom is Chair Professor of Public Management at City University of Hong Kong and Distinguished Professor of Public Administration at American University in Washington, DC. His research focuses on public administration and democratic constitutionalism.
E-mail: rbloom313@hotmail.com

demand more flexibility in terms of position classification so that federal employees could be reassigned to form “most efficient organizations” under the Office of Management and Budget’s Circular A-76 format. President Barack Obama’s administration has not introduced a comprehensive plan for adjusting or reengineering federal HRM. Thus far, his emphasis has been on insourcing, which, of course, runs the gamut of personnel functions—recruiting, selecting, placing, classifying, compensating, appraising performance, training, and engaging in equal employment opportunity and labor and employee relations.

Political Values

In terms of HRM, the major political values are representativeness and responsiveness to elected and appointed political authorities (including members of Congress). Representativeness, articulated by President Bill Clinton as “a government that looks like America” (Naff 2000), is built into federal HRM by the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978, which uses convoluted language to identify the same objective and includes provisions for combating the underrepresentation of demographic groups. Responsiveness concerns the interface between political executives and career civil servants, centering on the right balance of political control and employee protection from politicization and discrimination based on partisanship. The Senior Executive Service exemplifies this approach. Arguably, homeland security legislation providing managers with greater flexibility to reassign, transfer, and discipline subordinate employees tips it toward politicized management. Responsiveness also requires federal HRM to deal with political appointees, who have a high degree of turnover and sometimes try to “burrow in” to the career ranks.

Legal Values

Legal values in U.S. public administration are incorporated into statutes, executive orders and related proclamations, and constitutional law. Many are imposed on public sector HRM by judicial decisions. The dominant legal values in HRM are maintaining constitutional integrity and balancing the needs of governments as

employers with the constitutional rights of public employees as citizens or legal residents. With respect to federal HRM, constitutional integrity typically involves the scope of presidential versus congressional authority over employee job security, rights, and working conditions. Issues pertaining to the constitutional rights of public employees tend to involve procedural due process, Fourth Amendment and substantive due process privacy, equal protection of the laws, and First Amendment guarantees. Courts also play a large role in interpreting statutes dealing with technical aspects of labor relations and other HRM matters. Today, one cannot practice public sector HRM without reference to judicial decisions.

2020

These clusters are likely to persist into 2020, with relatively minor adjustments. Oddly, dramatic change is more likely to come by a U.S. Supreme Court decision stripping public employees of procedural due process protections or First Amendment rights than through the rise of a dominant political ideology or public administrative paradigm shift. The United States is a hyperpluralistic, fragmented society with a simmering 60-year-old culture war. Unless the nation coalesces around a new political movement with an ideology that can define public administration, 2020 will look a lot like 2010.

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