

NASPAA Core Competency: Public Service Perspective
Success, Motivation, and Transformational Leadership in Public Administration

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Success, Motivation, and Transformation

Many would agree motivation is one of the most important precursors to success. On the sidelines, the soccer mom screams (motivation) to her nine-year old to score a goal (success). The master's in public administration student wants to effectuate positive change in the world (motivation), so she studies, networks, and works to establish a career (success). These simple examples do not scratch the surface of the multi-faceted relationship between motivation and success, yet they illustrate universal experiences. Perspectives of motivation enhanced by Fareed and Su include a definition of success as the goal to motivation, data proving the positive correlation of transformational leadership and the public mindset in achieving success, and the power of transformational leadership to mitigate a lack of public mindset.

The Definitions of Success

Success is nearly impossible to define. Clearly, the soccer mom and MPA student will disagree. However, even when narrowing the scope of who or what success is referring to, it is an imperfect science at best. While Berman et al. (2020) explores methods and types of motivation, it does not thoroughly discuss what the manager or employee is motivating others or oneself towards, i.e., how each would define "success." As an essential function of public service is to assess, create, and maintain projects to serve the public, the necessity to narrow the definition of project success becomes paramount. Volden defined the "six evaluation criteria of project success as "effectiveness, efficiency, other impacts, sustainability, relevance, and benefit-cost efficiency for evaluating public projects" (Fareed & Su, 2022, p. 4). When considering the six evaluation criteria, the emphasis of the consequences, costs, and sustainability of public projects are recognized as essential factors in public administration. With a definition of success, the evaluation of the motivating factors which lead to that success becomes possible.

The Nature of Motivation

Theory X and Theory Y speak about the nature of employee motivation. According to Theory X, people are inherently lazy and because people do not have the intrinsic motivation to work and managers must introduce “carrots and sticks” to serve as external motivators to establish and increase their motivation to work (Berman et al. pp. 354-355). On the other hand, Theory Y admits to people being intrinsically motivated, but management is still required to provide professional development to increase performance in organizations (Berman et al., 2020, pp. 354–355). Both Theory X and Theory Y discuss the nature of the employee and motivational sources, but not the nature of success in organizations. While Theory Y discusses intrinsic motivation for work, the perspective of a specific public mindset of intrinsic motivation is introduced by Fareed and Su. Essential to the definition of the public mindset is an individual whose mind is set to serve the public with the purpose of doing good for others (Fareed & Su, 2022, p. 6). According to the research of Fareed and Su, the public service mindset also acts on external rewards such as job characteristics (significance, identity, and autonomy) so the public mindset is not entirely intrinsic in nature (2022, p. 9).

Even though an MPA program is full of individuals who either are or want to become public administrators, not one of our motivations are exactly alike. Some are intrinsically motivated as above with motivation to serve the public and help others. Some are in a mid-level administrative position and want to get to the next level in their agency. Those individuals are, at least partially, extrinsically motivated, whether by significance, identity, autonomy, or a salary increase. If MPA students had to fill out a survey, most would probably be classified as both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated, but all most likely possess a public mindset.

Public Administrators and Public Mindsets

The motivating factors of public administrators are important because they determine the trajectory of the decisions made by the administrators. For example, a public administrator may have an external motivation to receive public accolades to prove their “significance” (2022, p. 9). This external quest for accolades and a public mindset are not mutually exclusive. This public administrator may be motivated to open a new senior center, knowing there will be a ribbon cutting ceremony in the future. Yes, the public administrator will be praised, but the seniors are benefiting from this motivation. Moreover, everyone defines their own “significance.” Ribbon cutting ceremonies for human services programs are not the only way to gain accolades. A plethora of experiences and actions are worthy of praise, but this public administrator portrays the public mindset by helping the public while simultaneously helping themselves reach their own goals. *Why* a public administrator makes a choice is not as important as *what* choices are made by the public administrator. The consequences, or *ends*, of a public administrator’s choices are as important as *what* the choices are because a public administrator is always being scrutinized by the public. The public administrator who works toward the public good exercises a public mindset regardless of the reason *why* he chooses to do so.

On the other hand, another public administrator, or even the same administrator who is motivated by an intrinsic sixth sense to serve the public also exercises a public mindset when allocating funding for a program to enrich the lives of individuals with disabilities. Once again, the *what* trumps *why*. The public mindset prioritizes community welfare, but the beholder of the public mindset, the public administrator, is human with feelings and motivations as diverse as the public service projects implemented

Both Berman et al. and Fareed and Su suggest that a public service mindset and transformational leadership are positively associated with project success, but the article emphasizes how transformational leadership alone can be just as effective as the combination of the public service mindset and transformational leadership (Fareed & Su, 2022, p. 6). By collecting various data, Fareed and Su report that transformational leadership has the ability to lessen the impacts of a lack of public mindset (2022, p. 8). Thus, truly transformational leadership can reach project success effectively with a team of professionals who do not share a public mindset. The results of this data highlight the importance of manager-employee interactions and imply that the leadership in an organization affects project success significantly.

With transformational leadership's ability to foster success in organizations clearly outlined, it becomes clear that the need for recruiting, becoming, and sustaining inspiring leaders is more important than ever. The question of how one "motivates" oneself to "become" a transformational leader or "sustain" an ability to lead in a transformative way is not clear. For some, perhaps knowing the data's consequences of transformational leadership is motivation to learn how to "become" one. Perhaps a precursor to the success of transformational leadership is the belief that achieving transformation is possible.

Reflection

The NASPAA Core Competency: Public Service Perspective aligns with the terminology *public mindset*. With an emphasis on *transformational* leadership, a public administrator exhibits Berman's Theory Y. So far in my public administration career, I have worked with very few Theory Y leaders. The ones I worked with were memorable and encouraged transformation for not only me, but also colleagues and, most importantly, the public served. With only brief collaborations with these Theory Y leaders, I did not fully experience what being on a team lead

by a transformational leader would be like. However, I learned and experienced some key attributes I want to cultivate as a future leader in public administration.

One transformational leader I have encountered was not a direct supervisor, but someone equal to the rank of my supervisors. When I worked on a project for his division, his style was effective and contagious, in an effective way. What stood out as a transformational characteristic is that he praised his assistants and staff publicly. He graciously said kind words and acted graciously toward all of us who assisted on the project. With a sincere, public appreciation, I felt like my work was visible, understood, appreciated, and heard. He saw me and knew I worked on something. This small gesture of sincere public recognition spoke volumes to me. In the moment, I felt energized to work on that project even more. The positive effect was contagious; we all experienced it. I felt inspired to continue and confident in what I had already accomplished. This leader transformed what I thought was just going to be a regular meeting into an experience worthy of deep reflection.

Another Theory Y leader attribute is related to trust and delegation. Leaders who delegate and trust their staff accomplish a lot more. They invest the immediate time for building and training a trustworthy team so that their *long game* is strong. Both delegation and trust are exceedingly difficult for an industrious person to learn to do. The Theory Y leader acknowledges that learning to delegate and trust more is worker smarter, not harder.

On the other hand, the Theory X leaders who believe their staff are lazy and need consequences and micromanaging (usually) unknowingly enforce a hotbed susceptible to a hostile work environment. Quickly, the best talent will take the experience elsewhere and turnover will increase if Theory X leaders employ the carrot and stick approach.

References

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