

Designing Public Programs That Work: Moving Beyond Critical Failures In The Public Sector

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Introduction

The design of public programs that work is a critical topic today. We cannot solve the problems facing the country without learning how to design public programs that achieve their intended outcomes. The dissatisfaction and conflict now extending throughout the country are often fed by frustration and cynicism over past experiences.

It is possible to do better. Based on past research in public administration, new methods have been developed for analyzing programs. By considering how program actions lead to reactions by organizations and individuals, and how these actions and reactions combine to determine actual program outcomes, we can better learn what to expect. We can then move beyond the present critical failures in the public sector.

The Situation Today

The public at large is extremely dissatisfied with the ways in which government operates. This situation is contributing to large-scale rejections of government-led solutions to the critical problems that we face today. Public agencies are being faced with challenges to their performance and legitimacy. Administrators in the public sector are becoming all-too-accustomed to experiencing attack and criticism. Companies are being handicapped as they try to grow and succeed. As resources are not well-utilized, more pressure results on the standard of living for many people.

We have learned a lot about what does not work with public programs, including actual outcomes that do not resemble those that were advertised; actual costs that far exceed those that were budgeted; and a public that splinters into adversarial camps—that impair the political process and sap the strengths of the country.

We are growing accustomed to programs that fail. In health care—education—dealing with poverty—and coping with social disruption, our attempted interventions seem to be making things worse. We need new program strategies to improve the situation. Based on past experience, there is something wrong with the ways in which we go about identifying problems and attempting solutions. Our program interventions do not seem to work.

The situation is critical: the public is losing faith; politics is becoming more confrontational; and administrators often find themselves viewed as unable to effectively solve public issues by developing programs that perform as advertised. Given this situation, new approaches are needed to grow public administration to an improved level of performance.

We can improve this situation. We can better understand why programs fail, and design programs that are more likely to succeed.

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Why Do Programs Fail?

Programs may fail for a variety of reasons. Agencies may view themselves as all-powerful, and refuse to accept any limitations on the exercise of top-down power. Sometimes, potential problems are purposefully avoided by “looking away”—particularly when the mention of potential problems may displease those pushing a specific program change. The preferences of specific interest groups may overwhelm efforts to apply improved methods of program design.

Underlying these reasons for failure is a more basic cause: the designers of programs often do not make use of appropriate tools or methods to come up with programs that are likely to succeed. Established methods of analysis keep failing, but keep being put to use in the absence of alternatives. Most damaging is often the prevailing assumption that agencies have only to state what is to be done—in great detail—without considering the difficulties that may arise as organizations and individuals react to implementation efforts in ways that reshape program outcomes.

It may be argued that the basic problem facing the field today is that program design activities do not adequately consider how organizations and individuals are likely to react to program changes during implementation, and how program outcomes will then be reshaped. Compounding this problem is that, in order to include such reactions in planning and implementation efforts, alternative methods of analysis are required.

Developing An Improved “Method of Analysis”

We should recognize that our public agencies are not all-powerful: they cannot take any and every possible program design and force implementation to make the country perform as desired. No matter what programs are created through the political process, the organizations and individuals across the country will react to help shape their outcomes.

Based on this conclusion, improved methods for program design have been developed, building on the knowledge base of public administration and policy. A more realistic approach to dealing with organizations has been prepared.

Theory and practice in public administration are intertwined and cannot be separated. From this observation, new insights have been gained into how theories and practice strategies must evolve together, in response to change. The concept of Adaptive Administration has been put forward as a basis for better program design and administration.

Building on past research in public administration, a structured, text-based approach to program analysis has been developed. The procedure makes use of *qualitative* measures (analysis without numbers) to develop descriptive scales. All-too-often, program design emphasizes the use of numbers—which are presumed to be more exact because they look so authoritative.

Structured, text-based methods are shown to be more flexible and suited to the task at hand. The action-reaction method of analysis makes use of four steps:

Step 1: program actions are described on scales

Program actions may be described by making use of *qualitative* scales. The possible choices provided on each scale indicate how various program actions may impact a chosen organization of interest.

Step 2: organizational sensitivities to actions are described on scales

Using the same approach, an organization of interest may be described in terms of its sensitivities to possible actions—which will depend on internal features of the organization.

Step 3: possible organizational reactions are described on scales

The likely organizational reactions that will result from program actions and organizational sensitivities may be described in the same way.

Step 4: these scales are linked together

Look-up tables may be used to link the program actions, organizational sensitivities, and reactions that may be expected from an organization. These tables are based on experiences with past programs.

Developing A New “Way Of Thinking”

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For program design in unfamiliar areas, designers may follow this procedure step-by-step. However, once familiar with an area of application and the procedure to be followed—and with the programs of interest and organizations to be involved—designers may often be able to quickly estimate the reactions to be expected in a given situation. With experience, application of the action-reaction method may then become a “way of thinking” about program design. This is an advantage of the method of analysis, which may be used to improve the experience-based skills of designers. As a result, the method lends itself to educational programs that can help designers become prepared to deal effectively with the issues they will face.

Developing “Lessons Learned”

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Those who wish to assess program designs may also choose to work from summary “lessons learned” from past experience. These lessons may be derived by application of the action-reaction method to past program implementation efforts in a particular area of interest. Such

lessons represent “distilled” knowledge about key aspects of program implementation that are of interest.

Making Use of the Results

By working through a range of applications, designers may develop new insights that become ingrained. Once experience is gained with such methods, planners may develop new skills that speed up the process. Based on previous applications, the process may be used to develop “lessons learned” that are easy to apply. These lessons may be understood by everyone, and have the potential to change attitudes about program changes in general. Public discourse may be established to debate these lessons, which will shift the focus away from disagreements based on “sound bites” to discussions about the ways in which we should approach the solving of problems that we face.

A commitment to such methods has the potential for reducing public frustration and cooling down the intensity of present political struggles. If they choose to, designers and administrators can reassert themselves to move toward more effective interventions. They only have to develop the will and support, and make use of available design methods.

How Has This Approach Been Applied?

Examples have been used to illustrate the effectiveness of the procedure. A fictional scenario has shown how cooperation and conflict may be addressed in a typical city-government agency. The intent was to look for strategies that might be most effective to reduce conflict and improve cooperation with respect to a specific program change. A second example addressed an intervention that took place in a state medical school setting, with the objective of increasing organizational flexibility. A third example involved an analysis of how funding changes for medical services might affect providers and large employers.

In addition, detailed ongoing research has been conducted over the past six years (2010-2016) regarding the design and implementation of the Affordable Care Act (ACA, also known as Obamacare). As one of the largest public programs ever attempted, the ACA has revealed many failures in program design, with efforts by public agencies to adapt to a series of crises. These failures and efforts at adaptation have been examined by applying the action-reaction method of analysis to derive a set of lessons learned, and then applying the lessons.

The most recent insights regarding the ACA include “7 lessons learned” from implementation experience, which involve the following topics: the significance of program standards and mandates; how organizations and individuals react to program changes and shift outcomes; how mandates and choices are fundamentally different; how to identify and deal with technical and administrative problems; limitations of narrow cost-benefit studies as a basis for policy; and the impact of economic and social settings on program implementation. These lessons provide broad insight into the design and implementation of all public programs.

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Conclusions

The potential exists to design public programs that work. We are able to move beyond the critical failures being faced today in the public sector. New methods for the analysis of program design and implementation can be applied to help meet the most urgent issues facing the country today.

Resource Materials

The basic concepts described here are expanded upon in a recent book: Ferd H. Mitchell and Cheryl C. Mitchell, *Adaptive Administration: Practice Strategies for Dealing with Constant Change in Public Administration and Policy*, published by Taylor and Francis ©2016.

The ongoing research efforts regarding the ACA have been described in a series of five annual books over the period 2010-2016. The most recent edition of this series, which documents the "7 lessons learned", is in press: Mitchell and Mitchell, *Legal Practice Implications of Changes in the Affordable Care Act, Medicare and Medicaid*, published by Thomson Reuters (available February, 2017).

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