

Public Vs Private Managers: A New Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Does management in the public sector differ from that in the private sector? Most of the research evidence relating to this question suggests no significant difference between the two sectors. Nonetheless, the studies in this area have an important limitation, i.e., they have focused almost exclusively on the perspectives and activities of "senior" and "upper-level" managers while largely ignoring those on the front line - the "first-line supervisors". Are there, for instance, differences between public and private managers at the first-line supervisory level? The results of this study support a negative response to this question, but with one important exception. Specifically, "training employees" was found to be a relatively more important activity for public sector supervisors, as compared to their private sector counterparts. This is a surprising finding, in that the private sector is known to have a higher rate of employee turnover and, therefore, an assumed greater need for training new hires. There is no obvious explanation for this result and, to our knowledge, there is nothing in the research literature that helps to explain it. It therefore represents an important new area of research that needs further exploration.

Keywords: business conference, business journal

INTRODUCTION

The formal training for top-level managerial careers in the private sector typically takes place in business oriented programs where students study for the Master of Business Administration. Conversely, similar training for careers in the public sector occurs most often in public management programs where students study for the Master of Public Administration. This difference in formal education settings is due, in part, to the dominant belief that public management differs from private management. But, does it?

On the one hand, there is the contention that, while there may be differences between public and private management, they are more than balanced out by their similarities (5, 6, 11, 14). Yet, with respect to similarities, others contend that public and private management are alike in all unimportant respects (2, 4, 7, 10). Starling strikes a balance between these two perspectives by focusing on the "core functions of management". He states the following (7, p.34): *"At one level of abstraction, we can say that the five management functions are common to both public administration and business administration. But when we begin to consider the relative importance of these functions and how they manifest themselves in real-life situations, significant differences emerge."*

Nonetheless, even with this perspective, the research studies in this area have an important limitation, i.e., they have focused almost exclusively on the perspectives and activities of "senior" and "upper-level" managers. This means that the experiences of these two groups have framed the issues in this area, and because of this, there exists an "informational gap" in the literature.

This gap relates to the fact that, in relative terms, we are significantly less informed about the experiences and activities of those on the front line (i.e., the "first-line supervisors") than we are about senior and upper level managers. Are there, for instance, differences between public and private managers at the first-line supervisory level? This study is an initial attempt at answering this question, and others, by providing baseline data on the experiences and concerns of first-line supervisors in both sectors. The results from this study will serve to supplement what is already known about "public / private" management at the senior and upper management levels, thereby extending

our general understanding of the issues in this area. This extension will, of course, be of special value to those concerned with the formal training of public managers, in that it will give them a broader information base from which to draw as they continue their evaluation and refinement of public management as a unique discipline.

METHODOLOGY

All data for this paper were collected by the Center for Supervisory Research, James Madison University (3). In the survey, the Center received responses from 8,000 supervisors in 564 different organizational units covering 37 states. Three hundred and fifty eight of these participants were first-line supervisors in public organizations. They will be referred to as "public supervisors" throughout this paper. As for the private sector, it will be represented by manufacturing firms who had 3,176 subjects in the survey sample. Throughout this paper, this latter group will be referred to as "private supervisors". In the analysis, the responses of these two groups will be compared. Here the authors of the survey noted that all participants in the study completed a survey instrument that contained 149 questions of fact, opinion, and self evaluation (3). Most completed this questionnaire in group sessions under carefully controlled conditions. Approximately 20 minutes were required to complete the instrument.

As for the sample itself, it was large but not random. The results, therefore, must be viewed with the same caution one would exercise with any convenience sample. On the other hand, the authors of the survey noted that, when the sample demographics were compared with aggregate figures from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the results showed that the percentage distribution of race, sex, industry categories, and geographic areas within the sample was actually consistent with its percentage distribution in the U.S. States, thus indicating some level of representativeness (3).

RESULTS

Most Time Consuming Activities: What were the most time consuming activities for public supervisors, and how did they compare with those of the private group? In the survey, the subjects were presented with a list of 16 potential job activities. They then indicated the amount of time and attention spent on each. The response categories ranged from "1" (above average) to "4" (little or none). Table 1 is based on the former category, i.e., "above average". Note that, for the purposes of this analysis, all items in the "top five" categories of the table are viewed as being of equal importance and weight.

As indicated in Table 1, the "most time consuming activities" for public supervisors were quite diverse. They were "dealing with superiors", "developing new ideas for improving productivity", "doing the routine paperwork", "training employees for improved performance", and, "motivating employees in terms of performance". The common thread was interpersonal contact. That is, our subjects spent a significant amount of their time conversing with superiors, customers, and subordinates. Note, however, that this time utilization pattern was not unique to public supervisors, in that it paralleled that for the private group as well. Table 1 shows the parallel.

More specifically, Table 1 shows that, in terms of the five "most time consuming job activities", the public/private group rankings were identical for four of the five areas mentioned above. The one exception related to "training employees for improved performance". As shown, "training" was a dominant activity for the public group (i.e., it ranked in the top five category), but not for the private group, in that it ranked only twelfth in importance out of sixteen possibilities.

Most Prevalent Work Related Problems: Another area of importance related to the supervisors' perceptions of their "five most prevalent problems at work". The information on "work related problems" came from the subjects' responses to a list of thirteen potential problems. They evaluated each of these problems in terms of the regularity with which they occurred within their units. The response categories ranged from "1" (regularly cause problems) to "3" (rarely or never cause problems). Table 1 is based on the former category, i.e., "regularly cause problems".

The results of this analysis are shown in Table 1. As indicated, the public and private groups responded in essentially the same manner. That is, both groups indicated that the recurring problems were "labor shortages", "equipment breakdowns", "in-process storage space", "low quality work", and "shortage of materials and supplies".

Table 1: Conditions At Work

	Public Group N=358		Private Group N=3,176	
	Rank	%	Rank	%
1				
FIVE MOST TIME-CONSUMING ACTIVITIES:				
Dealing with superiors	1	24	1	26
Developing new ideas for improving productivity	2	21	2	23
Doing the routine paperwork (letters, memos, reports)	3	21	3	21
Training employees for improved performance	4	19	12	11
Motivating Employees in terms of performance	5	18	5	19
2				
FIVE MOST PREVALENT PROBLEMS AT WORK:				
Labor shortages	1	23	4	15
Equipment breakdowns	2	12	1	18
In-process storage space	3	11	5	15
Low quality work	4	10	2	17
Shortage of materials and supplies	5	09	3	17
3				
FIVE CONDITIONS RECEIVING THE MOST ATTENTION FROM SUPERIORS:				
Relationships with customers	1	30	4	29
Quality of work	2	25	1	34
Relationships with higher management	3	25	5	24
Keeping expenses in line	4	23	2	34
Volume of work	5	18	3	30

1
These five items were selected and ranked from a set of 16 activities – based on the percent of group members who reported spending an “above average” amount of time on them.

2
These five items were selected and ranked from a list of 13 potential problems – based on the percent of group members who reported that they occur “regularly”.

3
These five items were selected and ranked from a list of 10 departmental results – based on the percent of group members who responded “great deal” of attention from superiors.

Conditions Receiving the Most Attention from Superiors: Turning next to the supervisors' reports relating to the "five conditions that received the most attention from superiors". Form a list of ten departmental results, our subjects indicated the amount of attention each item generally received from their superiors. The response categories ranged from "1" (gets little or no attention) to "5" (gets great deal of attention). Table 1 is based on the latter response, i.e., "great deal of attention".

The results of this analysis are shown in Table 1. As indicated, the public and private groups, once again, responded in essentially the same manner. That is, both groups indicated that the conditions receiving the most attention from superiors were "relationships with customers", "quality of work", "relationships with higher management", "keeping expenses in line" and "volume of work".

Self Confidence: As noted in Table-1, the "five most time consuming tasks" for the public and private groups were as follows: (a) dealing with superiors; (b) developing new ideas for improving productivity; (c) doing the routine paperwork; (d) training employees for improved performance; and, (e) motivating employees for improved performance. Here the focus is on the supervisors' "self confidence" in their ability to execute these tasks in an effective and efficient manner.

In the survey, a list of seventeen tasks normally associated with a supervisory position was presented to the participants in the study. For each task, the participants responded on a scale of from "1" (not confident) to "5" (very confident). Those who responded "4" and "5" were coded as being "confident" in their ability to perform the relevant tasks.

The results of this analysis are shown in Table 2. More specifically, the table shows the percentage of individuals in the public and private groups who reported being "confident" in their overall performance abilities as related to the designated areas. And here again the public and private groups responded in essentially the same manner. For instance, consider the "five most time consuming activities", Table 2 shows that both groups reported similar levels of self confidence in their abilities to perform these activities ($p > .05$). The relevant percentages were as follows for the "five most time consuming activities": - Sell your ideas to superiors (75/70); - Develop new ideas for improving productivity (68/67); - Write clear memos, letters, and reports (80/76); and, - Motivate employees (62/68). Unfortunately, no information was available on "training employees".

Table 2 also shows that, for "other activities", the preceding pattern repeated itself. That is, in terms of performing the designated activities "with confidence", both groups once again responded in a similar manner ($p > .05$). It is of interest to note that, for all activities shown in the table, the participants in the study had the "greatest" amount of confidence in their ability to "talk to employees on a one-to-one basis".

Table 2: Supervisory Tasks Performed With Confidence

	Percentage of Public Group	Percentage of Private Group
<u>Five Most Time Consuming Activities</u>		
Sell your ideas to superiors	75	70
Develop new ideas for improving productivity	68	67
Write clear memos, letters, and reports	80	76
Training employees for improved performance	---	---
Motivate employees	62	68
<u>Other Activities</u>		
Talk to employees on a one-to-one basis	87	89
Solve departmental problems as they arise	79	79
Conduct a group meeting in your department	76	76
Attain departmental goals set by the company	75	76
Plan and control use of personal time	74	73
Conduct an effective performance appraisal	73	73
Maintain harmony within your department	73	79
Enforce disciplinary rules	63	72
Explain the company's budget program	51	56
Utilize statistical techniques	48	52
Explain computer inputs and outputs	44	47
Counsel an employee who will retire next year	32	35
Counsel and employee who abuses alcohol/drugs	31	39

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Does public management differ from private management at the level of the "first-line supervisor"? The pattern of the results in this study support a negative response to this question, but with one important exception. The exception relates to "training employees for improved performance". As indicated in Table 1, public sector supervisors reported spending significantly more time "training employees" than did private sector supervisors. This is evidenced by the finding that, in terms of "most time consuming activities", training was ranked 5th in importance by the public group and only 12th in importance by the private group (i.e., 12 of 16 response categories). This is a surprising finding, in that the private sector is known to have higher employee turnover rates and, therefore, an assumed greater need for training new hires.

While a surprising finding, it, nonetheless, parallels Starling's perspective with respect to public and private management. As noted above, Starling argues that, at one level of abstraction, the basic management functions are the same for both public and private managers. But when one considers the "relative importance" of these functions, significant differences do emerge between the two groups (13, p.34). Of course, this was the case in this study where the groups differed with respect to the relative importance of "time spent training employees", i.e., where public sector supervisors reported spending significantly more time in this area than did their private sector counterparts. Why this difference? There is no obvious explanation for this result and, to our knowledge, there is nothing in the literature that helps to explain it. It therefore represents an important new area of research that needs further exploration.

Except for the training difference, however, the public and private groups responded similarly on 14 of the 15 key indices shown in Table-1, and on all five of the key indices in Table-2. Both groups, for instance, spent a significant amount of their time "dealing with superiors", "developing new ideas for improving productivity", "doing the routine paperwork" and "motivating employees". Moreover, in their efforts to effectively execute these tasks, they even encountered similar problems. That is, both groups faced the key problems of labor shortages, equipment breakdowns, in-process storage space, low quality work and a shortage of materials and supplies.

Not only did the groups evidence similar patterns of activities and problems, but they also reported similar levels of confidence in terms of their coping abilities. An important dimension of these findings was that, while ranking at the top of the list in terms of time consuming activities, "developing new ideas for improving productivity" and "motivating employees" were rated relatively low by both groups on the confidence dimension. That is, our groups manifested relatively low levels of confidence in their ability to execute some of the very tasks that tended to be the most demanding in terms of time and energy requirements. For instance, Table 2 shows that, in terms of developing new ideas for improving productivity, only 68% and 67% of the groups, respectively, reported being confident of their ability in this area. Moreover, only 62% and 68% of the groups, respectively, reported being confident in terms of motivating employees for improved performance.

In all, then, the dominant pattern of our results, as shown in Tables 1 and 2, support those who argue that, in general, while there may be differences between public and private management, they are more than balanced out by their similarities (5, 6, 11, 14). And in this sense, our findings are consistent with the "generic" school of thought with respect to the training of public managers. Here the argument is that, because of the overwhelming similarities between managing in the public and private sectors, there is little justification for the separate training tracks that now exist in many educational institutions, i.e., one for the Master of Business Administration and one for the Master of Public Administration. Instead, the argument goes, the appropriate strategy is to offer a "generic" program of study for all students, irrespective of their career orientation (public or private). Some examples of the generic approach, for instance, can be found at Northwestern University, Cornell University, and the University of California, Irvine.

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