
Tracing the Concept of Mission in Public Organizations

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Abstract

This article traces the concept of mission within public organizations through a comprehensive review of classic and contemporary literature in public administration. It identifies how early theorists such as Luther Gulick, Dwight Waldo, and Norton Long recognized mission as fundamental to effective governance, linking organizational purpose with democratic accountability. Later developments in leadership theory, strategic management, and public service motivation expanded this understanding by emphasizing how mission shapes employee commitment, stakeholder relationships, and organizational performance. The review further explores how mission determination is mediated through leadership, external influence, and public values. Contemporary debates center on the balance between mission-based management and constitutional values, with scholars such as Rosenbloom, Goodsell, and Shields highlighting the need for inclusive, evolving definitions of mission that reflect democratic and pragmatic principles. The paper concludes that while mission continues to be a vital organizing concept, significant gaps remain in empirical research on how missions are defined, translated, and operationalized across different levels of public organizations. These areas present promising opportunities for future inquiry.

Keywords: mission; public administration; public service motivation; organizational commitment; leadership; public management; democratic governance

1. Introduction

1.1 Mission Statements in Public Organizations

Mentioning the terms “mission” and “mission statements” can cause employees to groan audibly. This is in large part because of cynicism that exists among many employees with a long institutional memory. This attitude has been contributed to by the over-exuberance of many managers in pursuing trendy management theories. Exploring “mission” has generally been equated with strategic planning or some other management technique. In the private sector, mission may simply be a management tool, however, in the public sector it frequently connotes something more. Private sector organizations are focused on the goal of the organization of providing shareholders value. Nonprofit and public sector organizations exist for a variety of reasons, often not simply stated. Nonprofit organizations are also overwhelmingly mission driven. Many public organizations also seek to clarify their mission, while not explicitly constraining service. In agencies, “mission”, is most frequently referenced when an interest group or politician seeks to limit the activities of an agency.

There are generally two streams of thought, regarding mission in nonprofit and public organizations. The first is centered on mission as a management tool primarily for the benefit of the organization's employees. This concept of "mission" is grounded in business management and organizational theory literature. The second stream of thought is derived from nonprofit organizations. "Mission", in this context, is not only important for internal organizational actors, but also a significant for external stakeholders.

An organization's mission impacts its relationship to its environment and has a direct bearing on normative questions regarding agency behavior. The perceived mission can also impact on the effectiveness of the organization and its employees. While many would trace the focus on mission to efforts to incorporate private sector management practices into the field of public and attrition, this is not always the case. The field of public administration has a long history of examining the qualities that make public organizations effective. Within this body of work are the foundations for tracing the concept of mission and public organizations. This article traces the concept of mission in public organizations. It is a literature analysis of the concept of mission, looking for gaps that could lead to future scholarly research.

For many public managers, the "reinventing government" initiative of the Clinton Administration introduced them to the concept of mission. "Reinventing government" mandated strategic planning and inferred that a formal mission should be established. Nevertheless, there has been little study of the process or the effect on public organizations. By broadening the definition of mission, however, one can see that the concept is prevalent in various veins of organizational thought. This study begins by delving into the foundations of missions and public organizations. It continues by discussing how mission is determined, public-service motivation, and a general discussion of mission and public organizations. Finally, it culminates with a discussion of the implications of the current body of literature and areas where there could be promising future research.

1.2 Determing Mission

"We are all mediators, translators. In philosophy, as in all domains, you have to reckon with, while not ever being sure of it, the implicit level of an accumulated reserve, and thus with a very great number of relays (teaching, newspapers, journals, books, media), with the shared responsibility of these relays." -Jacques Derrida

Derrida refers to the complex said of dyadic interactions that impact how information is transmitted. Each link in the chain of information mediates and translates it, and the meaning is created in the process. Notwithstanding the difficulty in conveying mission, the concept as general guidance and an overall sense of purpose can still be important. For poststructuralists this may be too substantial a departure from their logic to hold up to their scrutiny. Nevertheless, Derrida mentions how powerful directed information can be as it is mediated and translated continuously. If effectiveness can be impacted by a sense of the purpose of organizations, and

tone for mediations and translations set by key contributors, it follows that there is great importance in attempting to determine the mission of an organization. (Derrida 1995)

Much of the available literature focuses on leadership as the driver in determining mission. While admittedly, it falls short in attempting to build a more “democratic” organizational structure, often the literature directs leaders to receive input from employees as part of the consensus building process. Nonetheless, exploring who or what determines mission in an organization is important to understanding the concept’s impact on organizational thought (Derrida 1995)

Selznick (1957), in his classic work *Leadership and Administration*, contended that leadership, in order to be effective, must understand power and values within an organization. Furthermore, the leader must be able to “gain spontaneous and reasoned support,” in order to fully integrate the organization. This discussion is underpinned frequently by the age-old question of how a leader can best unify organization towards a common cause. The natural answer seems to be for the organization to rally around a sense of mission. While Selznick does not explicitly state mission definition as the solution, many of the problems he identifies as being endemic to leaders and public organizations would seemingly be positively affected by meaningful discussion regarding agency mission. (Selznick 1957)

Continuing the focus on the importance of leadership and public organizations, Robert Behn (1989) contends that individual leadership matters. He stated, “the agency head must create a mechanism for achieving purposes that resonate with the values of those who work in the agency and provide with critical resources.” The process he describes is called transactional leadership. This could be considered inclusive management, because it involves an exchange of “valued things” between organizational actors and stakeholders. Much of Behn’s discussion implies establishing a formal mission for an agency. This could be the mechanism that is necessary to rally employees and stakeholders around the organization. (Behn 1989)

Critics of Behn’s viewpoint point out that acknowledging the effectiveness of the leadership of agencies may give politicians greater justification to return to the “spoils” system of civil service. While that is a possible reading of Behn’s research, it is important to note that high-level professional staff and agencies also have a great capacity to shape the mission of the organization. Leadership is not simply the domain of political appointees; agency staff are very effective at impacting the behavior of organizational actors in their own ways. (Behn 1989)

Other researchers have investigated the skills that leaders must have in public organizations. Conger (1991) found that leaders must be effective at strategy and inspiration. He contended that the leader of any organization, to be effective, must be able to synthesize convey mission to other organizational actors. His conclusion was that organizations need to improve the way that they frame mission and goals by linking them to the values and beliefs already in place. Furthermore, Conger stated that the significance of the mission must be stressed, and the

“antagonists” and assumptions must be dealt with. His advice to leaders was that they should craft a narrative that stresses all of these factors and inspires employees. (Conger 1991)

This effort to consciously craft a narrative that impacts organizational mission is subject to environmental conditions. Nicholson-Crotty and Nicholson-Crotty (2004) studied how interest groups influence the priorities of public organizations. They theorized that the level of access and perceived power of her group are determinants of group influence. Furthermore, they found that accessing power contributes to the amount of influence a group has over the priorities and mission organizations as influenced by management. (Nicholson-Crotty and Nicholson-Crotty 2004)

This body of literature serves to establish some of the research is taking place regarding how missions and public organizations have been determined. Frequently, leadership plays a role in determining mission. At the very least key actors in the organization serve as conduits for interaction with stakeholders, filter that information and set the boundaries for the discussion. Nevertheless, there are other groups and individuals that have significant input in a shift from simply a purpose to a formal mission. This translation can be complex and if overly driven by a small group of actors could be controversial and contrary to organizational culture. Thereby, rendering an organization even less effective than prior to the introspection that led to a discussion of mission.

1.3 Public Service Motivation

The body of literature regarding missions in public organizations frequently lists several benefits to establishing a mission statement. Not the least of which is that an established mission gives employees a sense of pride and purpose and can possibly lead to lower turnover. Much research, beginning in the 1990s, examined why people become public servants. From this body of research involved the theory of public service motivation. This theory has been influential in both the public and nonprofit sector and helping to explain why people go to work in the public sector or for nonprofits. More importantly, the theory seeks to explain what motivates employees to stay in public organizations.

Perry and Wise (1990), in an article that started the public service motivation school of thought, examined the reasons people choose to go into public service. In their view, increasing trends threaten the concept of a public service ethic. The first was the rise of public choice theory as an economic basis for policy and programmatic decisions. Since public choice theory is rooted in the assumption that humans behave in a self-interested manner, and therefore organizations should be structured to take advantage of this behavior. The second trend was the increase of monetary incentive programs for government managers. Their research was geared at “clarifying the nature of public service motivation” and “identifying and evaluating research related to its effects on public employee behavior.” They hypothesized that the more a person is motivated towards public service the more likely they will become a member of a public organization. They also hypothesized that individuals with a high level of public service motivation will perform at a higher level and public organizations. Their final hypothesis was

that public organizations with large numbers of highly motivated employees are less likely to use “utilitarian incentives” to manage performance. (Perry and Wise 1990)

While Perry and Wise looked at why people go to work for an organization, other researchers have investigated what causes employees to be committed to it. Mathieu and Zajac (1990) performed a meta-analysis regarding organizational commitment. They found that different types of organizational commitment can affect individual performance. With the significance of organizational commitment established, one must consider how it is fostered and organizations. (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990)

Researchers have also looked at the impact that organizational behavior has on individual ethics. Brewer and Selden (1998) discussed how public service motivation links to public interest. The article also explains public service motivation as a theory how certain individuals “predisposed to public norms and emotions, act in a public interest even when doing so runs counter to their self-interest.” The author is looking to public service motivation and whistleblowing and found that many whistleblowers put their public norms above their narrow self-interest. Their conclusion was that there was support for the theory of public service motivation. (Brewer and Selden, pp.1998)

Researchers also explored what motivates public employees to excel in their jobs. Alonso and Lewis (2001) used multiple regression and logit analyses on the 1991 “Survey of Federal Employees” and the 1996 “Merit Principles Survey” to look for linkages between motivation and job performance and public employees. They found mixed evidence regarding the motivation of employees and their job performance. Employees who expected a bonus or other award for job performance attained higher grades performance ratings. They also found that there was no evidence of employees with a high “public service motivation” cared less about material awards and bonuses. (Alonso and Lewis, 2001)

Brown and Yoshioka (2003) investigated employees of nonprofits attachment to a mission and their satisfaction and how that impacted their retention. They found that employees generally have a positive attitude towards their organization, and this attitude was impacted by satisfaction and employees’ intention to remain with the organization over the longer term. Nevertheless, employees who were dissatisfied with their compensation would not be retained simply because they were attached to the mission. Their conclusions were that mission is important in attracting employees to be less useful when attempting to retain them. (Brown and Yoshioka, 2003)

Seok Eun Kim and Jung Wook Lee (2007) Lee explored the impact that agency mission had on the employees of a nonprofit organization. They found that generally employees of the nonprofit had a positive attitude regarding mission of the organization. However, employees viewed career opportunities and pay is having a bigger impact on their decision to continue working in the organization. Their conclusion was that mission does help retain nonprofit employees because it reduces their dissatisfaction with their wages and career prospects. (Seok Eun Kim and Jung Wook Lee, 2007)

Bright (2005) researched the factors that cause public employees to be highly motivated with personal characteristics, monetary preferences, and management level. The finding a link effectiveness s were that gender, management level, monetary preference, and education level are related to public service motivation. (Bright, 2005)

This body of literature paints a general picture of nonprofit and public employees being significantly impacted by their perception of the mission of their organization. In some cases, the research shows, but this is one of the most significant factors in recruiting new employees to both types of organizations. Nonetheless, mission matters, or least helps in attracting and retaining human capital that makes an organization successful.

V. Mission in Public Organizations

To fully understand the impact the concept of mission has on public organizations, one must look into a more general discussion of the relevant literature. Establishing a mission as a planning tool was one of the earliest uses of scholars found permissions and public organizations. Daniel Jensen (1982) recommended the sixth planning process to unify public organizations. His first step was” a review and redefinition of the core mission.” In his view the core mission explained why the organization existed in a simple statement or a set of simple statements. Jensen intended this statement to be crafted by the manager and while the manager should seek input from others, the final decision should be his or hers. (Jensen, 1982)

Jensen further contended that the core mission “affects everything to follow, so care must be given to its construction.” This mission should be symmetric with the authorizing legislation or from the organization's original charter. He contended that periodically the mission should be re-examined and redefined to cause a refocus on the direction of the organization. Jensen desires not to have missions of public organizations remain static, rather he wants changes to be made transparently in the public view. While some might criticize this view of mission as being too legalistic, it is useful to consider mission and its effect on the stakeholders of an organization. As stated previously, there are internal and external reasons why mission matters. Jensen's work primarily focuses on the external. (Jensen, 1982)

The internal effect of mission statements was explored by Ireland and Hitt (1992). There is a caveat to this research however, this dealt primarily with private sector organizations. Nevertheless, it has been significantly cited throughout public organizational literature and is therefore relevant to this review. Ireland and Hitt found that mission statements, in the private sector, help direct the effort of corporate strategists and managers. Statements help to guide accomplishments and purposes within corporations. The authors define a mission statement is a statement that “... describes the firm's fundamental, unique purpose.” They also contend that the need to develop mission statements arose from confusion in complex and ambiguous environments. They found that several factors can cause difficulty when an organization attempts to develop statements. A very diverse group of organizational stakeholders can complicate the formulation of a mission statement. Comfort with the status quo, the amount of

work it takes to develop a statement, and suspicion regarding the intended purpose behind the planning process, can all derail the process. (Ireland and Hitt,1992)

Not everyone views mission statements positively. Alan Ehrenhalt (1997), in a column in governing magazine took to task school administrators for their lofty mission statements. He contended that the “grandiose” mission statements of school districts suggested that the administrators hadn't “figured out what they were supposed to be doing.” This was directly opposed to prosecutors’ offices and water departments which had a clear sense of mission. At the end of his article, he makes this observation regarding mission statements; “If you know what you're doing, you probably don't need one. And if you don't know what you're doing, a mission statement probably isn't going to help you.” Ehrenhalt’s criticism is warranted as by the late 1990s strategic planning including determining mission statements was the management tactic “du jour.” It is important to note though, that other researchers have found that mission statements can be significant in affecting and even shaping organizational behavior (Ehrenhalt, 1997).

Weiss and Piderit (1998) in their exploration of public schools found that mission statements matter. In fact, their research found considerable variation among the schools’ mission statements and a notable impact on the behavior of employees. The authors did not delve into how the mission statements were determined, due mainly to the limitations of the data, but this work did establish that mission matter in public organizations (Weiss and Piderit, 1998).

Ihrke (2004) explored how radical changes in the mission of Federal agencies affect employee transfers. The findings of his large N study (1248 employees of the United States Department of Agriculture), indicate that “radical mission change” significantly influences the rate of employee transfers. The author looked at employee burnout, staffing levels, and mission change. He found that mission change causes a significant rise in employees’ rates of transferred to other agencies. This lends weight to the concept that either employees self-selected agencies with similar norms and values to their own, or once indoctrinated, agency employees often resist. drastic mission change. (Ihrke, 2004)

Bradley Wright (2007) has written about whether mission matters in public agencies, also. His conclusion was that mission gives individual employees “goals” that they feel they can work towards. Wright’s findings seem to confirm Weiss and Piderit’s contention that mission is important in public agencies. (Wright, 2007) This body of work adds to the evidence that mission does matter, even if it is only in the periphery. With this established, the questions turn to what promising areas there are for researchers who better want to understand mission in public organizations.

2. Future of Mission in Public Organizations

After sorting through this body of literature, it is important to think in terms of where the concept of mission will lead researchers in the future. Since establishing a mission statement has become more prominent there is more research into some of the limitations of defining a mission in a

public organization. Rosenbloom and Piotrowski (2002) eliminated some of the drawbacks relating to defining the mission of an agency. In their view, a myopic focus on mission of agencies ignores the constitutional values that should be featured in public administration. They refer to these as “non-mission-based values.” The author's argument is compelling. Too much focus on the mission of agencies can limit their constitutional role as upholders of the public good. Furthermore, by linking public management and mission, it opens agencies to criticisms of their policies and programs by the mission as interpreted or perceived by interest groups. (Rosenbloom and Piotrowski, 2002)

There is a more positive vein in the literature relating to constitutional values and its impact on the mission of public organizations. Charles Goodsell (2006) argues that agencies must have a sense of their history, and agency employees must have pride in their organizations if they are to be effective. The mission of an organization, especially if it's deeply rooted in a long history of service, can act as a powerful motivator for employees (Goodsell, 2006).

There is even a substantial movement relating to missions in agencies with a distinctive postmodern influence. The concept of mission in public organizations has some important linkages that one might not immediately consider. In her article on pragmatism, Patricia Shields (2008) discusses the “provisional” nature of mission statements in public organizations. She contends that there is merit in an organization refining its purpose and continuously reexamining and refining them as conditions change. Mission as a process can be instrumental in citizen participation and inclusive management. (Shields, 2008)

Since postmodern public administration is deeply rooted in attempting to encourage dialogue, what better subject of conversation and discussion of the mission of public organization? Redefining and exploring an agency's mission seems to fit naturally with discourse oriented public administration theory. Certain elements of critical theory, particularly those relating to analyzing assumptions upon which decisions are made, also seem to fit well with the pragmatist view of mission. Mission is not simply a tool for accountability or management but can also be a process-oriented postmodernist tool for encouraging dialogue.

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3. Results

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VII. Implications

This preliminary body of research establishes that mission can be important in setting the tone for the culture of public organizations. Mission is conceptually important because it can cause discourse and give direction to organizational actors. Furthermore, it is not simply an imported management technique or a product of the “re-inventing government” trend in administration. Open and free dialogue regarding the purpose or mission of an organization can be extremely valuable in aiding employees and clarifying behavior to stakeholders.

There are some other implications regarding mission that should be considered. First, mission statements do not replace the constitution as guidance for administrators. Rather they are operational statements of organizational values that complement the constitutional role of administrators. Furthermore, mission statements should not be static, rather they should be frequently revisited through an open and organic process with employees and stakeholders. These statements, as mediated and translated by employees, offer them specific guidance that allow them to better exercise their discretion. So, in essence a general statement of mission enables an agency to deal effectively with their environment rather than limiting it.

The concept of mission can be significant and important public organizations. Nevertheless, relatively speaking there has been little written on the impact of missions on public organizations. There is a considerable gap in the research of missions and public organizations relating to the processes which missions are determined. Perhaps most interesting would be an analysis of the stakeholders who have influence in determining the mission of an agency. This could be a discourse analysis centered on what different stakeholders to you the general purpose or mission of an organization as being. By comparing the discourse to agency employees were leadership's views of the purpose of the organization, one could hypothesize regarding which stakeholders had significant input vis-à-vis others.

Yet another possible avenue for research could be within different levels of an organization. Specifically, one could look into how organizational actors translate and mediate the mission statement and then operationalize it. By comparing this data with organizational leadership and stakeholders' views of the purpose of an organization, one could track how the knowledge was translated in ways different from the key actors who established the mission statement. Overall, there are many other areas within organizational literature that could be illuminated by a deeper examination of purpose or mission.

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