Dynamics of public sector accountability in an era of reform

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Reform

Administrative reform has enjoyed significant support in Europe, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand during the past decade (Campbell and Peters, 1988; Christoph, 1992; Stone, 1993; Campbell and Wilson, 1995; Kettl and DiIulio, 1995); it has also 'permeated Latin America, entered Asia, and most recently penetrated Africa' (Kearney and Hays, 1998). In contrast to this widespread support at the nation-state level, the adoption of reforms at lower levels of government is more uneven (Brudney et al., 1999). These reforms have been manifested in various ways and under numerous labels, depending upon the national context. In western democracies these reform efforts have gone under the labels of reinventing government, new public management, and managerialism, with the avowed intent of increasing efficiency, responsiveness and accountability of public managers (Barzelay, 1992; Christoph, 1992; Osborne and Gaebler, 1992; Gore, 1993; Mascarenhas, 1993; Dunn, 1997; State Services Commission, 1997; Hood, 1998).

Most of these reforms have intended to change the culture and context within which public managers conduct their duties to increase government's efficiency, effectiveness and accountability. Strategies adopted have included decentralizing government, downsizing government, cutting red tape, increasing administrative discretion, empowering workers, encouraging entrepreneurial behavior, managing for results, and increased attention to performance measurement to make accountability more transparent (Campbell, 1993; Gore, 1995; US General Accounting Office, 1995; Peters and Savoie, 1996).

While being in favor of efficiency, responsiveness and accountability is a popular rhetorical stance, the reality of public sector reform represents substantial challenges, not the least of which is how reforms impact the accountability of public administrators. These reforms have implications for the accountability relationships of government agencies and public managers; Olsen (1988) notes that the patchwork of administrative reform can result in administrative apparatus that are more complex and render accountability more obscure. The long-term

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success of such reforms requires consideration of the accountability dynamics and recognition of appropriate changes in the culture of accountability (Blanchard et al., 1998). Yet many reforms have been proposed and undertaken with the presumption that, once the reforms are in place, accountability will somehow take care of itself (Moe, 1994; Garvey, 1995). Using the experience of government reform in the United States as illustration, this article examines the accountability implications of contemporary administrative reform.

Accountability

Accountability is always a challenge for management and it is even more so in a time of reform when the potential for sending employees mixed signals about expectations is especially great. The rhetoric of reform usually poses questions of accountability in terms of whether government employees are *more* accountable after the reform than they were before. While it is not impossible to discuss accountability in terms of *more* or *less*, doing so implies a unidimensional, linear concept that does not reflect the complexity of public management in western democracies. A more useful approach, which is employed in this analysis, recognizes the various dimensions of accountability and the complex context of public accountability. While there are numerous governance problems related to accountability issues (Romzek and Dubnick, 1998), this analysis focuses on the web of multiple accountability relationships and how the different types of accountability align with various managerial reform strategies.

Accountability, which is understood as answerability for performance, raises immediate questions for the one held to account. Accountable to whom? For what? And how? The answers to these questions are not simple, especially in complex western democracies, such as United States and Westminster models of governance, where employees typically face multiple sources of legitimate authority and competing expectations for performance (Rockman, 1984; Dubnick and Romzek, 1993; Campbell and Wilson, 1995). Authority relationships and legitimate performance expectations can derive from supervisors, elected chief executives and legislators, the courts, external auditing agencies, professional associations, coworkers, clients, and the general public (Aberbach et al., 1981; Dubnick and Romzek, 1991; Finn, 1993; Campbell and Wilson, 1995). These multiple sources of authority present challenges to public officials because occasionally it is unclear which of the focal points (or sources of expectations) constitute the most legitimate source of authority for a given situation. Bovens (1998: 155) notes that even 'the primacy of politics' principle leaves cloudy the issue of exactly where the primacy applies; it could be 'at the top of the civil service, with the political management, with the cabinet, with the cabinet party or parties, with the parliamentary committees, with the members of parliament as a whole or with the electorate'.

These different authorities vary in the nature of the accountability relationships they can activate to hold public employees answerable and the nature of the performance standards used. Some strategies rely on external sources including

legislative oversight, monitoring, and executive appointments originating with external democratic institutions, e.g. elected chief executives, courts, and legislatures (Finer, 1941; Gruber, 1987). But the reality of public management, and the fact that the nature of the work of civil servants affords them many opportunities to exercise discretion in the course of their work (Lipsky, 1980), give rise to expectations and control strategies that derive from internal sources also (Friedrich, 1940; Burke, 1986). The result is a mix of active and reactive postures of legitimate authorities vis-à-vis the accountability of civil servants. Those seeking to elicit accountability from a public official can anticipate and define administrative action through rules and delegation. Or the various authorities can adopt a reactive posture, using after-the-fact evaluations of performance to discern whether the behavior falls within desired boundaries.

There has been much discussion of which type of accountability best accords with democratic theory. Regardless of which is more compatible with democratic control, the fact of the matter is that the pattern in western democracies is to employ multiple accountability strategies (Bovens, 1998; Romzek and Dubnick, 1987; Romzek, 1998). The analysis which follows relies on a framework which recognizes the wide range of accountability relationships used in the United States at various levels of the federal system (Romzek and Dubnick, 1987, 1994; Radin and Romzek, 1996; Romzek, 1998).

Types of accountability
The pragmatic approach to public accountability in the United States has been to design solutions to accountability problems as they arise, without regard to elegance of design or redundancy. As a management problem or scandal arises, new accountability relationships are instituted to prevent such circumstances from arising in the future. These new accountability arrangements are not substituted for accountability relationships in place at the time the problem occurred (which, in light of the emergent problem, are now perceived to be inadequate). Rather the new arrangements are added to accountability relationships already in place. The resulting array of accountability mechanisms provides numerous opportunities for holding public employees answerable for their performance.

This pattern of layering accountability relationships has been repeated time and again. The result is the weaving of a thick web of multiple, overlapping accountability relationships within which public administrators work. These multiple accountability strategies result in a web of potential accountability relationships that reflects both internal and external sources of authority (for expectations and/or control) and differing degrees of autonomy regarding administrative actions. Figure 1 presents the four different types of accountability: hierarchical, legal, political and professional (Romzek and Dubnick, 1987; Romzek, 1998). The broken lines separating the categories are to convey the permeability of these boundaries, that the horizontal and vertical axes represent continua.

Hierarchical accountability relationships are based on close supervision of individuals who have low work autonomy and face internal controls. The under-

FIGURE 1
Types of accountability relationships

		Source of Expectations and/or Control	
		Internal	*External*
Degree of Autonomy	*Low*	Hierarchical	Legal
	High	Professional	Political

lying relationship is that of supervisor–subordinate. Immediate supervisors and periodic performance reviews are the most visible manifestations of hierarchical accountability. For example, individual performance evaluations tend to be detailed and the evaluative standard is whether the individual performed as directed, e.g. met performance expectations as articulated in supervisory directives and rules. Performance questions are framed in terms of obedience. Other examples include rules, regulations, organizational directives, and various workplace mechanisms that minimize discretion, such as time sheets. Campbell (1993: 112) provides an interesting extension to this type of accountability, noting that officials' 'commitment to serve extends to the anticipation of superiors' wishes and the duty to apprise them of matters which they might otherwise have overlooked'. Hierarchical accountability, while straightforward in theory, is a bit slippery in practice (Bovens, 1998); it is best used in simple administrative strictures in stable environments. 'Instructions laid down in codes, circulars and general guidelines . . . often lose out to the norms, obligations and relations rooted in daily practice of the organization' (Bovens, 1998: 84).

Traditional 'merit'-based civil service systems that are organized around position classification schema exemplify a reliance on low discretion and supervisory control. Executive orders as agency directives, administrative program checklists, and management within personnel ceilings also typify this category of accountability. Administrative reorganizations, to the extent that they focus on specifying the distribution of responsibilities and lines of reporting, represent hierarchical accountability at the agency or corporate level. Most reorganizations are intended to strengthen effective executive leadership and to integrate authority within the executive more tightly (Aberbach and Rockman, 1988). The practice of requiring 'legislative clearance' is another example. It enables the US president to intercept administrative testimony and reports submitted for the conduct of legislative oversight, and to interdict bureaucratic proposals for programs that might be antithetical to the president's objectives (West, 1995).

Legal accountability relationships involve detailed external oversight of performance for compliance with established performance mandates, such as legisla-

tive and constitutional strictures. The use of the term legal is meant to convey the level of detailed scrutiny typical in judicial proceedings, 'most constraints that seek to guarantee . . . accountability to the courts are . . . ultimately designed to ensure that decisions are technically correct' (West, 1995: 68). The underlying relationship of legal accountability is that of a principal–agent; the accountability standard focuses on whether the agent has complied with the principal's (externally derived) expectations. While oversight can be anticipatory, especially through informal inquiries and direct communications between external reviewers and administrators, this form of accountability is typically reactive. It is usually conducted through detailed investigations, such as legislative oversight (McCubbins and Schwartz, 1984; West, 1995), financial or program audits, and employment grievances reviewed by external monitoring agencies.

In contrast to hierarchical accountability, legal accountability relationships are between two relatively autonomous actors. For example, judicial review of police work in the American system involves close scrutiny of police behavior to ascertain compliance with constitutional protections. When a judge finds unacceptable behavior on the part of police, the recourse is not to sanction the police officer; courts do not have supervisory authority to do so. Instead courts can invalidate the judicial proceeding against the accused which is tainted by the unacceptable behavior.

Although legal accountability reviews often are supported by the weight of law, and the underlying value is the rule of law, this type of accountability is manifest in arenas far beyond courts of law. In Britain, the 1979 creation of House of Commons select committees which shadow specific departments greatly enhanced the exposure of civil servants to parliamentary inquiries (Campbell 1993); a similar situation exists in The Netherlands (Bovens, 1998). In Australia, such oversight, in the form of financial audits, might be conducted by the Auditor-General; Parliament also 'has the opportunity to review, scrutinise, monitor, test, and verify' the quality of public management (Uhr, 1993: 13).

External investigatory and 'blue ribbon' commissions reflect this external monitoring approach to accountability. Historical examples in the United States include: the (Earl) Warren Commission, which investigated the assassination of President John Kennedy in 1963; the (William) Rogers Commission, which investigated the explosion of NASA's Challenger space shuttle in 1986; and the (Warren) Christopher Commission, which investigated the practices of the Los Angeles Police Department after the widely publicized police beating of motorist Rodney King in 1991. A similar investigation in the UK is represented in the Franks Report, named for its chairman Lord Franks, which examined in detail the crisis that led to the Falklands War (Campbell and Wilson, 1995). In New Zealand, Judge G.S. Noble directed a commission of inquiry into the collapse of a viewing platform at Cave Creek that reflected legal accountability (Gregory, 1998).

The other two types of accountability, professional and political, reflect situations where the individual or agency has substantially more discretion to pursue

relevant tasks than under legal or hierarchical types. And the review standards, when they are invoked, are much broader. The difference between professional and political accountability is the *source* of the standard for performance. Under professional type of accountability the source of the performance standard is the individual's own internalized standards and judgment. Under political account-ability the source of the performance standards is the 'other' and whether the administrator has successfully responded to the others' concerns. The perme-ability of the boundary between professional and political accountability is exemplified when one's professional norms include responsiveness. Campbell and Wilson (1995: 264) note:

> In the absence of effective and available sanctions or punishments, the responsiveness of officials to politicians has been secured through professional norms and values. To those who would say that norms and values are a slim foundation on which to base political institutions, we can only reply that much in Westminster model countries, including in the final analysis the protection of democratic rights, has depended on such equally slim foundations.

Professional accountability systems are reflected in work arrangements that afford high degrees of autonomy to individuals who base their decision-making on internalized norms of appropriate practice. They 'are influenced more by internalized values and norms than political responsiveness' (Seldon et al., 1999: 194). The use of the label 'professional' is intended to convey the sense that this form of accountability reflects the type of deference to specialized knowledge and expertise that is traditionally accorded to professionals; it is not limited to individuals who hold professional credentials per se. It is used when institutional leadership recognizes that special skills, experience or working methods are needed and defers to individuals who have that specialized knowledge.

This type of accountability emphasizes deference to the administrative experts. Under this standard individuals face questions about whether their performance is consistent with norms derived from professional socialization, personal con-viction, organizational conventions, or work experience.[1] Performance standards are established by professional norms, accepted protocols and prevailing practices of one's peer or work group. The behavioral expectation is that discre-tion will be exercised responsibly and in a manner consistent with accepted norms of responsible practice.

The traditional Whitehall model, with the dependence of ministers on a pro-fessional, non-partisan civil service for advice, represents professional account-ability. Higher civil servants in Britain constitute a professional group who, in the words of one observer are 'socialized, not trained' (Rose, 1984) and 'imbued with the practical knowledge of problems that came from a long career in government' (Campbell and Wilson, 1995: 302). Within this system, the highest-ranking civil servants in each Department, the Permanent Secretaries, enjoy considerable autonomy in relation to the Head of the civil service. The expertise of the senior civil servants as group of generalist administrators 'is not based on knowledge of

specific or detailed issues but on knowledge of how to work the government machines and the skill to condense complex issues into a form that can be understood by ministers with little background or training in the policy areas' (Campbell and Wilson, 1995: 38). In addition there are other, highly expert economists and scientists with the civil service who are 'on tap not on top' (Campbell and Wilson, 1995: 21).

One Whitehall official explained the primacy of professional accountability standards in this way, 'It's not necessarily the hierarchy, it's the peer group you account to . . . it's how you're seen in the eyes of your colleagues . . . it's actually how you're viewed by your colleagues is the thing that would drive me' (Campbell and Wilson, 1995: 255). Several scholars have noted important changes in norms and practices that have occurred and modified the monopoly of the civil service in advising ministers (Christoph, 1992; Campbell and Wilson, 1995).

Political accountability relationships afford managers the discretion (or choice) of being responsive to the concerns of key stakeholders, such as elected officials, clientele groups, and the general public. Civil servants in this relationship have the discretion to decide whether and how to respond to key stakeholder concerns. Such officials are what Aberbach and his colleagues (1981: 323) describe as 'political bureaucrats', administrators who recognize they are actors in a common pluralistic game, where the 'bureaucrat and legislative politician are dependent on one another'. They look outward for political signals and support; conversely, they face external sources of expectations and are answerable to external groups. Contemporary emphases on customer service orientations and responsiveness to client needs reflect this type of accountability relationship. Customer or clientele satisfaction surveys are examples of performance measures linked to this value of responsiveness.

This relationship mirrors that of elected officials to constituents with its emphasis on responsiveness to the wishes and agenda of 'others', reflecting mutual adjustment between stakeholders and administrators, including legislators as 'conduits for group pressures' (West, 1995). Under political accountability, the administrator is the responsive actor and relevant stakeholders are the administrator's constituents. The essential point is that the accountable official anticipates and responds to someone else's agenda or expectations — ones that are beyond the scope of supervisor–subordinate obligations or professional expertise. Campbell (1993) notes such behavior among 'democratically-orientated officials' who seek to anticipate the mandate of elected officials and the public will through independent soundings of the public mood. Others have observed these activities as well:

> American civil servants are in a prime position to build durable relationships with congressional committee staffs and members. This enables them to both protect their superiors, and when the need arises to protect themselves from their superiors. American bureaucrats are also superactive in their involvement with interest groups. Such groups swarm around bureaucracies everywhere, but the independence of

> Congress from the executive induces American bureaucrats to build support for their
> own interests from clientele groups who can wield influence on Capitol Hill.
> (Aberbach et al., 1981: 325)

When the relevant stakeholder is the cabinet minister, civil servants find ways
to anticipate the minister's wishes. 'Meanwhile back at the Ministry, the civil
servants know that to deal promptly and helpfully with any problem arising out of
Parliament is the surest way to the Minister's heart; if they keep him out of
Commons scrapes, he will be all the readier to listen to their advice on policy'
(Mount, 1992, quoted in Campbell and Wilson, 1995: 284).

The longstanding system of political appointees is intended to insure respon-
siveness to elected officials. The Thatcher Government's 'direct interest' in the
appointment of permanent secretaries, which until then had been left to the civil
service, with an eye to achieving 'responsive competence' (Mascarenhas, 1993)
exemplified an interest in increasing reliance on this type of accountability.

> The formal structure of the Whitehall model is intact . . . Bureaucrats still play an
> important part in policy making and advising, but that part has been reduced in order to
> make room for politically sponsored policy entrepreneurs and analysts in think tanks,
> the Policy Unit [a mini White House staff in Prime Minister's Office] and, through late
> career appointments such as Terry Burns's in the civil service itself. (Campbell and
> Wilson, 1995: 298)

In an interview in 1988, a UK official confirmed this shift to responsiveness as
a performance criteria; commenting,

> there was a continuing and increasing pressure to be politically accountable. It's a
> fundamental change, going on for some time — even before Mrs. Thatcher. She has
> continued it — the politicization of officialdom. Your career wouldn't go further if you
> didn't take a political posture toward your obligations, and to your advice accordingly.
> (Quoted in Campbell and Wilson, 1995: 218)

The different values and behavioral expectations emphasized by the various
accountability relationships are summarized in Table 1. Each of these four types
of accountability relationships can be used to hold individuals and agencies
answerable for their performance. While different authorities may accord differ-
ent priorities to these various types of accountability, each is legitimate; each
seeks to promote a different important value of government in the United States,
efficiency, expertise, rule of law and responsiveness. Of course success in
advancing these values is not guaranteed.

Dynamics of accountability

Accountability, as the process of holding someone answerable for performance,
presents a variety of issues for public officials who work within this web of
accountability relationships. These different types of accountability present
dynamics that vary among agencies and within agencies. First of all, each of these

TABLE 1
Values and behavioral expectations of different accountability types

Accountability	Value emphasis	Behavioral expectation
Hierarchical	Efficiency	Obedience to organizational directives
Legal	Rule of law	Compliance with external mandates
Professional	Expertise	Deference to individual judgement and expertise
Political	Responsiveness	Responsive to key external stakeholders

four types of accountability relationships can be present within one organization and multiple types may even be used within one office. In theory, any one individual or agency can be answerable for performance under all four different types of accountability simultaneously. More often, one or two types of accountability relationships are primary, with the others 'in place' but under-utilized, if not dormant. In times of crises or serious failure, the under-utilized types are typically invoked (Romzek and Dubnick, 1987; Romzek and Ingraham, 2000), often leaving the individual or agency 'answerable' under all four behavioral standards.

Second, while there may be fairly stable patterns of accountability relationships typically used, there are often shifts in the relative priority assigned to accountability expectations. The same actors can find themselves facing shifts into different accountability relationships as other behavioral expectations become salient. 'Even hierarchically-orientated officials keep a weather eye open beyond their immediate superiors to the political leadership of their department' (Campbell, 1993: 112). Sometimes sources of authority switch from invoking one kind of accountability relationship to another. As a result, the same actors can be involved in different accountability relationships at different times, sometimes emphasizing obedience, and, at other times, deference to expertise, rule of law and/or responsiveness. As these expectations shift, so too must the civil servant as he or she seeks to answer for performance under shifting standards. What is defensible performance in one instance may be 'I followed the rule' (hierarchical). In another instance, with political accountability as the standard, defensible behavior may be 'I did what I anticipated the minister would need'.

What makes the accountability picture confusing to the casual observer is the fact that the same legitimate authorities can shift from invoking one type of accountability relationship to another. For example, an immediate supervisor can issue direct orders to subordinates one day (hierarchical accountability) and the next day seek to anticipate and respond to those same subordinates' expectations, perhaps regarding work assignments or working conditions (political accountability). At other times that same boss may delegate discretion to his or her subordinates, signaling that the subordinates will be held to answer for their performance under professional accountability standards, where they are expected to

exercise their best judgement rather than follow rules and directives. In this latter circumstance, administrators' performance will be judged on whether their decisions were responsible and consistent with accepted practices. In other instances subordinates may be responsive to the agenda of their boss even though the employment relationship does not require 'obedience' on the matter at hand. Examples abound of employees vigorously supporting their superiors' agenda as politically expedient career moves. Extending these examples to circumstances where elected officials play active roles, the same shifts can occur. One day a legislator can be part of an investigation into an agency's fund expenditures (legal) and a week later that same agency may face a decision about program implementation and whether to be responsive to that same legislator's wishes. Metaphorically speaking, the legislator can wear an auditor's hat one day and a customer's hat the next. From the civil servants' perspective, survival skills involve being keen observers of hatwear. Perhaps a more apt metaphor from civil servants' perspective is that of trying to keep firm footing on shifting sands.

A third dynamic within the accountability context reflects the fact that these accountability expectations can conflict. There are instances where accountability to one authority under one standard violates the expectations of legitimate sources of authority under another standard. Following rules often requires one to be unresponsive to a constituent's request for special treatment. At other times exercising one's professional judgment can conflict with rules (Maynard-Moody and Leland, forthcoming). Senior public officials in Whitehall reported encountering conflict between expectations of the Prime Minister (political accountability) and their own Departmental Minister (Campbell and Wilson, 1995: 257). During the Thatcher era in the UK, civil servants reported that the Westland Affair[2] presented them with such a conflict; they felt caught between complying with supervisors' directives (to leak confidential material to the press to undermine a member of the Cabinet) and the norms of senior civil service as a permanent, professional bureaucracy (Campbell and Wilson, 1995: 254).

A fourth interesting feature of accountability dynamics is the fact that one type of accountability relationship can be used to trigger another type of accountability. For example, in the United States, when an executive order is issued, the President utilizes his/her position as chief executive to issue a directive to subordinate agencies. President Clinton's Executive Order 12862, issued in 1993, put far more discretion into the hands of front-line managers and emphasized responsiveness to external clientele.[3] This executive order is an example of one kind of accountability relationship (hierarchical) being used to promote the use of other kinds of accountability (professional and political).

The wide range of potential accountability relationships presents important and complicated questions regarding which one(s) to use, especially since the reforms seek to increase accountability. The reform trend has been to shift from a heavy reliance on rules and process orientations toward increased discretion, flexibility, and entrepreneurial behaviors. In accountability terms, such changes reflect a shift in emphasis away from hierarchical and legal standards of accountability

toward professional and political ones. The long-term success of these reforms will be affected by the alignment of managerial strategies, administrative tasks, and accountability practices.

Accountability implications of reform

Contemporary administrative reform is complex and multifaceted. Two central tendencies stand out: changing structures and increased attention to performance criteria. Both of these warrant attention because of their implications for accountability practices. Strategies to relax rules, decentralize authority, increase discretion, and encourage entrepreneurial behaviors are all targeted toward greater autonomy.

Changing structures

One popular strategy involves altering the structural features of administrative operations. In the United States, the emphasis on changing structure has taken the form of downsizing, streamlining, restructuring, and privatizing (Gore, 1995; Ingraham et al., 1998).[4] These various structural reforms reflect the use of hierarchical accountability relationships to shift emphases to other types of accountability, typically to either professional or political standards. Many of the areas of reform in the United States relate to personnel matters. For example, the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 restructured the federal civil service in the United States, relaxed civil service rules that constrained managerial (and presidential) discretion, and granted more management flexibility to the Office of the President, especially through the presidential appointment process. The result has been to add levels of political appointees at the top of federal agencies (Ingraham and Ban, 1984; Aberbach and Rockman, 1988). Westminster systems have also eased up constraints on personnel decisions to effect change, resorting to a greater number of political appointments as a means by which prime ministers and cabinet members can gain greater control over the bureaucracy (Campbell and Wilson, 1995).

Britain used structural change to create the Next Steps agencies, which emphasize a managerial perspective in running the agency and civil service staff; this is in contrast with the generalist, political executive tradition that had dominated Whitehall previously (Campbell and Wilson, 1995). Next Steps agency executives were given greater freedom from political controls and constraints of the civil service to pursue efficiency. Observers predict the Next Steps approach, with its quasi-autonomous status from their ministries, will likely erode accountability to Parliament (Campbell and Wilson, 1995: 278–81).

For those civil servants still under political controls, reforms under Thatcher enhanced responsiveness (political accountability) and diminished deference to expertise (professional accountability). 'The percentage of ministers willing (if only out of fear of the Prime Minister) to tell more expert civil servants that they were wrong was unusually high' (Campbell and Wilson, 1995: 308). In New Zealand, the administrative reform strategy reflects a heavy reliance on contract-

ing out for government services, including having departmental chief executives working under employment contracts of up to five years (State Services Commission, 1997; Gregory, 1998).

Another of the major thrusts of recent government reform has been to shrink its size and off-load as many services as possible to non-profit and private sector entities (Kettl, 1993; Wallin, 1997). The US government has long used contracting in key areas, like defense; more recently governments in the US have sought to contract out at state and local levels (Romzek and Johnston, 1999). Contracting with non-governmental organizations allows government to shrink its workforce and provide services at lower costs because the non-governmental entities are not so bound up in red tape as are typical government agencies. Non-governmental entities enjoy greater flexibility in programming, greater responsiveness to changing client needs, and the ability to maintain control over services at the community level.

With privatization initiatives, the presumption is that market forces will impose cost and quality discipline on contractors. The accountability question is whether the contract product or service is delivered. The logic of accountability under contracting is that of specifying mutual expectations, responsibilities, and obligations of the contracting parties. The expectation of proponents of contracting is that clearly specifying the terms of the contract, fiscal reporting, and monitoring performance under the contract will be sufficient to ensure accountability. Some government actor, as principal, monitors the agent for compliance with the terms specified in the contract and for performance outcomes.

At first glance contracting appears to entail obvious legal accountability because it relies on specifying detailed terms of a contract and a government contract officer monitoring the contract for compliance. But questions arise about whether contract monitoring will be sufficient to minimize ambiguities of control and assure fiscal accountability to government for contractual obligations (Blanchard et al., 1998; Johnston and Romzek, 1999). Contract adjustment mechanisms, which are often necessary in these new initiatives, are difficult to design. Research on local government privatization initiatives found that US cities, at least, do not do a good job of contract oversight (Dilger et al., 1997).

Changing standards for evaluation
Another aspect of reform focuses on changing how *performance is measured* and evaluated rather than how *activities are structured.* Performance review of government operations has typically been based on compliance with laws, rules and regulations, reflecting inputs and process orientations. Contemporary government reforms seek to shift evaluations away from a rules and oversight approach toward new emphases on discretion and responsiveness. This latter approach seeks to shift performance measures toward output and outcome measures. In contrast to inputs and process orientations, a focus on outputs and outcomes emphasize deliverables of work rather than going through the proper motions.

Reforms in Australia, Britain and New Zealand, which were designed to give department heads 'total autonomy and responsibility' for managing departments, 'moved from input controls typical of government bureaucracy to a system of managerial incentives based on outputs as a basis for measuring performance' (Mascarenhas, 1993: 326). In Australia, the Financial Administration and Audit Act of 1985 requires annual agency reports based on indicators of performance; since 1992 these indicators must be audited by the Auditor General for relevance, appropriateness, and representativeness of the measures to the agency's stated objectives (Stone, 1993).

Experience with management reforms in New Zealand, Australia, and the United Kingdom was used to support a similar reform approach in the United States (Radin, 1998). In the United States, the focus has been on developing more useful (and objective) measurement systems, such as financial measures of cost per employee hired, customer satisfaction measures, workforce capacity measures, employee satisfaction and process effectiveness measures, such as cycle time and productivity (National Academy of Public Administration, 1997; US General Accounting Office, 1998b; Kopczynski and Lombardo, 1999). Benchmarking, the systematic examination of products, services or work processes against the best practices of similar organizations, reflects this second aspect of reform. It emphasizes developing explicit standards against which performance is evaluated (Ettore, 1993; Greengard, 1995; Coe, 1999).

The US Office of Personnel Management recognizes managers are more likely to manage against outputs than outcomes (National Academy of Public Administration, 1997). The Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) is an example of the US government's aspiration to move toward outcomes and outputs; it requires agencies to develop five-year strategic plans and identify programme performance goals and quantifiable measures for performance-based budgeting (Kettl et al., 1996). Early experience with GPRA suggests a 'tangled set of expectations and experiences' (Radin, 1998: 307) with problems defining goals and performance measures, dealing with data, and determining levels of analysis.

An *inputs* orientation focuses on resources, what an agency or manager has available to carry out the program or activity — such as budget levels, number and skill mix of employees, compensation costs, supervisory ratios, and succession planning program. Staffing directives in the US Federal Workforce Restructuring Act of 1994 are an example of an input approach to personnel policy; it mandated government-wide reductions of 272,900 FTE (full-time equivalent) positions through FY 1999. The General Accounting Office reports that several departments are developing performance measures that gauge their personnel servicing ratios; it notes that while such a ratio 'provides a broad measure of efficiency . . . [it] does not indicate how well an agency's personnel office meets the needs of its customers' (US General Accounting Office, 1998b: 19).

A *process* orientation emphasizes proper paper flow and consultation with

relevant, appropriate actors and compliance with mandates and regulations (National Academy of Public Administration, 1997). In a process orientation, performance measures emphasize compliance, e.g. grievance/appeal/litigation costs, and the question is whether proper procedures are followed and appropriate questions considered, rather than whether the intended result is achieved. In a social service agency, where transactions are the main mission, a process measure might focus on whether proper procedures and formulas were being applied and whether individuals who were denied benefits were accorded appeal opportunities. Reductions in force, veterans preference programs, as well as grievance and disciplinary hearings are personnel activities that reflect a heavily process orientation.

Outputs are the quantity and quality of services delivered or products made. There has been a great deal of activity setting up output measures. When relying on outputs, there is a tendency to emphasize measures that are easily obtained, for example, the number of candidates interviewed, income tax returns processed, or grant programs reviewed. Output measures include standards for *services*, such as timeliness, that clientele can expect when they contact the agency. Employee and customer service satisfaction levels are examples of output measures widely used, such as the employee surveys regularly conducted by the US Merit Systems Protection Board.

Outcomes reflect the quantity and quality of the *results* achieved by the outputs in satisfying the client, taxpayer, customer, or program needs. An outcome measure might gauge a change in the level of environmental pollution, or the occurrence rates of a targeted disease, or level of poverty in a given area. In the civil service area, the US General Accounting Office reports a negative outcome experienced by many federal agencies which lost critical expertise due to broadly targeted early retirement opportunities associated with federal downsizing; NASA, for instance, reported losing 'centuries of expertise' (US General Accounting Office, 1998a). Although most reforms aspire to increase the use of outcome measures, success is not assured; there are substantial difficulties in developing and using performance indicators to measure results (Schick, 1990; Kettl, 1995; Radin, 1998). There are political, managerial, and methodological challenges associated with developing and using outcome measures for accountability (Risher and Schay, 1994; Kravchuk and Schack, 1996; Radin, 1998; Romzek, 1998).

These distinctions between inputs, process, outputs, and outcomes orientations for performance evaluation become important when the focus is on administrative reform. As reforms introduce different managerial strategies and emphases regarding work, accountability practices need to shift accordingly.

Accountability alignments
The issue of the fit between organizational activities and accountability relationships used is an important consideration in management reform. In times of reform, there is often a shift in among the different types of accountability

(Romzek, 1998). In fact, calls for 'more' accountability are often calls for a reliance on a 'different kind' of accountability with different expectations for performance, rather than just 'more of the same'. In seeking to change the operations of agencies and employees, it is essential to have corresponding shifts in accountability relationships so that behavioral expectations are appropriately aligned with managerial emphases. The new behaviors sought need to be reflected in the administrative measures used to evaluate agency and individual performance.

The decision as to which accountability relationships are appropriate is a function of the organization's institutional environment, managerial strategy, and agency or individual tasks (Romzek and Dubnick, 1987). The institutional environment affects the nature of the assignments agencies and individuals are given and the expectations they face. Throughout western democracies, the institutional environment for public service has been a turbulent one for the past two decades (Kearney and Hays, 1998). For example, the American public service has been subject to a steady stream of severe criticism from elected officials, popularly known as 'bureaucrat bashing' (Garvey, 1995). Likewise many of the reforms in the UK were seen as attacks on senior civil servants (Campbell and Wilson, 1995). And the current institutional environment continues to be highly critical of administrative capacity and effectiveness. This critical stance is, in fact, the major impetus behind current administrative reforms.

Managerial strategies embodied in the different reforms are typically multifaceted; they seek to encourage discretion, flexibility, entrepreneurship, empowerment, and customer service. Most of the recent managerial reforms tend to seek different emphases (on performance, outputs, and outcomes) rather than the complete elimination of any one orientation (e.g. inputs or process); public administrators concern themselves with the manner of performance as well as the results (National Academy of Public Administration, 1997). The nature of the core job tasks also can affect whether managerial reforms warrant adjustments in accountability relationships. More complex tasks require more discretion.

While the conditions of public administration are rarely ideal, it is possible to discuss 'ideal' accountability configurations reflecting a 'fit' between reform and accountability practices (Romzek and Dubnick, 1994; Romzek, 1998) in the same way that Max Weber offered a profile of an 'ideal' bureaucracy. Figure 2 presents a baseline framework illustrating how current managerial reform strategies and core tasks can be aligned in terms of accountability relationships.

When an agency's managerial focus is on inputs and its tasks are routine, hierarchical accountability, with its emphasis on limited discretion, is an effective alignment. In such instances performance is judged by how well administrators deployed organizational inputs at their disposal — e.g. time, effort, workforce (average grade, supervisory ratios) or funds. For example, issuing payroll checks is a relatively routine task that lends itself to management by direction and application of rules.

When an agency's managerial focus is on processes and its tasks are still rela-

FIGURE 2
'Ideal' accountability alignments: managerial strategy and core task

Core task

	Routine			Non-routine
Inputs	HIERARCHICAL			
Process		LEGAL		
Outputs			POLITICAL	
Outcomes				PROFESSIONAL

Managerial strategy (label at left, spanning Process and Outputs rows)

tively routine, legal accountability relationships are typically the most effective alignment. Processing veterans' preference claims or social service benefits requires careful attention to due process and affords limited discretion. In such instances compliance with the rule of law is the important value. Agencies monitoring contracts with non-governmental entities often focus on whether proper processes are followed.

Circumstances where agency tasks are less routine and managerial strategies focus on outputs lend themselves to political accountability relationships, where the emphasis is on responsiveness to some key stakeholders. Customer service programs that emphasize customer satisfaction typify this alignment. Senior officials' responsiveness to ministers, especially when there is disagreement as to what is the best course of action, is an example of when political accountability might be most appropriate.

Where the task is very specialized and the managerial strategy is focused on outcomes or results, professional accountability relationships represent the best alignment because it allows for the exercise of discretion and the application of expertise. Proposals to adopt a 'block grant' approach to civil service functions represent an emphasis on discretion at an agency level (Kettl et al., 1996), as does the US Office of Personnel Management's delegation of human resource management authority to federal departments, and those same department's further delegation of these responsibilities to individual line managers (US Merit Systems Protection Board, 1998a).

This discussion about shifting emphases away from inputs and process toward outcomes and outputs reflects the rhetoric of government reforms. The language of reform is enticing. It is a fairly simple task to repeat the various reform mantras: 'cut red tape; empower employees; emphasize results, not rules; delight your customers'. These phrases appear on the surface to be obvious and straightforward prescriptions for action: simply tell public managers what outputs and outcomes they are expected to achieve and then give them the flexibility and discretion to do so. The fact of the matter is that following these prescriptions involve difficult shifts 'away from the control model and move toward the

developmental model, including approaches to motivation and recognition of group performance' (Lane, 1994: 39).

This multi-method approach to accountability, where several accountability relationships exist simultaneously, is not a unique situation. Given the presence of several legitimate sources of authority and multiple, diverse expectations, a multi-method approach to accountability may be most appropriate, even if the situation occasionally presents public administrators with cross-pressures. However, the pattern of multiple, overlapping accountability relationships means that the likelihood of facing at least one less-than-ideal alignment in public management is the norm rather than the exception. For administrators, this circumstance presents a substantial, ongoing management challenge that is critical to successful reform: minimizing the gap between rhetoric and reality.

Gap between rhetoric and reality
Government reforms seek to increase the reliance on some kinds of accountability relationships and de-emphasize others, reflecting a mix-and-match approach to accountability practices rather than an all-or-nothing approach. Cutting red tape and speeding up procedures that ensure due process represent efforts to lessen the constraints from hierarchical and legal types of accountability relationships. While hierarchical and legal accountability are never completely abandoned, the success of the current wave of reforms necessitates de-emphasizing obedience to organizational directives and compliance with external mandates. The pattern is to shift emphases among accountability relationships rather than discarding one or another type of accountability relationship altogether. Reforms that seek increased employee discretion, worker empowerment, and flexibility represent professional accountability. Emphases on employees' responsiveness to key clientele and the use of customer satisfaction performance measures reflect political accountability.

Reformers need to be cognizant of the accountability dynamics that follow logically from reforms and make appropriate adjustments. The challenge is how to shift emphases *away from* a focus on inputs and processes and *toward* outcomes and outputs in light of the fact that some managers may be more comfortable than others with increased discretion and flexibility (Ban, 1995). These administrative reforms may be de-emphasizing old, familiar accountability relationships *before* the substitute accountability structures have become firmly implanted. Yet, failure to align government reforms with appropriate accountability practices will seriously undermine the likelihood that the changes will be successfully implemented. If alignments are less than ideal, a circumstance that is typical in the multi-method accountability context of public management, then the long-term success of management reforms is at risk. If accountability practices do not reinforce the newer strategies and tasks, then administrative reforms are not likely to become deeply rooted in organizational practices (Schein, 1992).

A troubling dynamic associated with these management reforms is a gap between the rhetoric and expectations of government reform and the reality of the

unique administrative cultures. While management reforms seek to encourage initiative and sometimes even necessitate entrepreneurial behavior — for example, to continue to provide high levels of service with reduced staff and funding — accountability practices themselves may not change as quickly as the rhetoric suggests. This gap between rhetoric and expectations is characteristic of the accountability environment within which public organizations and public managers operate.

The key questions are whether the managerial reforms actually afford the discretion that promoters promise and whether accountability arrangements are aligned with espoused performance standards. Campbell (1993: 124) provides a perspective on this difficulty in the words of a top UK official during a confidential interview,

> I said to Treasury, and so did many others, 'This is a fine doctrine, but unless you believe it and are prepared to implement it and accept what goes with it, it won't work.' Because you can't say to someone, 'You're responsible for your budget and you won't get any more money, and you can carry your own account,' if at the same time you are saying, 'I will determine your staff, what they will be paid, how much you will pay for accommodation . . . ' And, this is exactly how it worked out. The amount of delegation of eventual control was at most five percent.

Australian respondents echoed similar sentiments regarding the Finance Department (Campbell, 1993: 124).

> I really don't see . . . this enormous extra flexibility. Year by year when you're in a situation of 'OK, here's another 2.5 percent here's another 4 percent or here's your target of 200 million that you've got to save . . . ' Yes, you have some flexibility in terms of attempting to identify how you save those couple of hundred million dollars. But that's not totally new. We've always tended to have that sort of flexibility anyway. The sort of flexibility that I heard touted was more a question of 'Here you are with a certain size bucket and we'll be flexible about how you rearrange your priorities within it'. When they were talking about flexibility, they weren't talking about the bucket getting smaller and smaller all the time.

In the case of the US political culture, it may be that these reforms are not compatible with the American political and managerial culture. The American polity is not necessarily comfortable with the heavy reliance on accountability practices that are appropriate for the new reforms, such as high levels of discretion and entrepreneurial management. Reformers cannot simultaneously prevent abuse and promote discretion (Kettl et al., 1996: 66). Yet that is what is expected.

For management reforms to become thoroughly embedded, widely accepted, and effective, they need to attend to issues of accountability alignment. For supervisors, the important managerial implication of accountability alignment is to be sure that performance evaluation criteria match the managerial emphases and behavioral expectations that management hopes to elicit from employees. Employees' performance will follow those aspects of their behavior which are

measured and rewarded. If management reform rhetoric emphasizes employee discretion and autonomy, but performance reviews emphasize rules and processes, then employees will emphasize rules and process in their work efforts. This same dynamic applies at the corporate level also.

Conclusion

For the past century, the American public service has been structured with an eye toward eliminating favoritism and constraining managerial choices. The result has been a large accumulation of administrative rules and regulations, rendering public administration slow and cumbersome. Implicitly, those rules and regulations condoned a trade-off of administrative efficiency for accountability. Pressures for enhanced efficiency in government have forced a re-examination of this trade-off around the globe, with western democracies being in the forefront in adopting these reforms.

Administrative changes have included downsizing, decentralization, deregulation, and re-engineering with the goal of smaller, more responsive, more entrepreneurial, and more effective public management systems than the old procedure and rule-based approaches allowed. Operationally, these reforms have heightened the visibility and interest in issues of accountability as they encourage more discretion on the part of managers, more flexibility in administrative operations, and greater emphases on outcomes and outputs to enable government to better manage its new challenges. Hence the accountability relationships that are best suited to these reforms are professional and political types which rely on deference to expertise, increased discretion and responsiveness.

Taken as a whole, this 20-year era of government reform has been driven by complex, multifaceted motives, including increasing administrative efficiency, effectiveness, flexibility, and responsiveness. The accountability landscape for public administrators is in a great deal of flux as efforts are made to reform administrative processes, redefine agency missions and values, and adjust reporting relationships. The rhetoric of reform usually poses questions of accountability in terms of whether government employees are *more* accountable after the reform than they were before the reform. A more useful line of inquiry focuses on the *kind* of accountability that is appropriate, given the management emphases and administrative tasks at hand. De-emphasizing inputs and processes and emphasizing outcomes and outputs does not necessarily mean more or less accountability from government administrators. Rather it means different kinds of accountability relationships should be emphasized.

Reformers face two implementation questions regarding accountability. One relates to the alignment of accountability practices that are appropriate given the managerial reforms and the behaviors the reforms seek to encourage. It is a truism in management that one needs to measure and evaluate the behaviors one wants to encourage. If reforms seek new managerial strategies and reconfigured tasks, then accountability relationships need to be reconfigured, too. This means that government reformers need to measure and evaluate behaviors that are consistent

with entrepreneurial management, increased discretion and worker empowerment in daily operations, and greater responsiveness to key stakeholders and customers. The worst situation of all is to have changes in administrative approaches without appropriate shifts in the emphases on accountability relationships.

The other question relates to the design of effective accountability relationships given the behaviors management seeks to elicit from employees. Given an interest in increasing discretion and responsiveness, it is appropriate to rely on output and outcome performance measures for accountability proposes. But the challenge of designing effective accountability measures based on outcomes and outputs is substantial. It requires agreement on outcomes and outputs as well as deference to administrative discretion, standards of acceptable practice, and responsiveness to customers.

Reforms that seek to change administrative practice also need to consider the accountability culture of public management. Administrative reform in complex western democracies must contend with a deep-seated risk averse managerial cultures (Christoph, 1992; Light, 1994; Ban, 1995; Campbell and Wilson, 1995). In the United States this includes an emphasis on short-term results over long-term outcomes (US Merit Systems Protection Board, 1998b). It is unclear whether the American populace, its political institutions, and its managerial culture are ready to afford public agencies and their employees the discretion and flexibility that such reforms entail. In the United States the political culture is blame-oriented, rule-oriented, litigious, and the institutional context has never been very trusting of government and its administrators (Peters and Savoie, 1994). There is no sign that trust is on the upswing; rather it is declining (Ruscio, 1996; Kearney and Hays, 1998). Investigations of the accountability culture in Westminster systems have also found questions regarding the degree of appropriate discretion for public officials, especially to the extent that it erodes the concept of ministerial accountability (Campbell and Wilson, 1995; Bovens, 1998; Gregory, 1998).

The challenge facing public administrators, whether senior administrative officials or not, continues to be their age-old one: how to manage the conflicting expectations they face in an institutional environment that relies on an overlapping array of accountability relationships. As a result of reforms, civil servants find themselves with fewer detailed directives; and they face much less certainty about the accountability consequences of their actions. Yet they must continue to accommodate expectations from several different legitimate sources and be answerable for their behavior under any and all accountability relationships that are relevant. And they must be able to shift the accountability standard under which they answer for their behavior, as needed. Like actors in repertoire theater, public administrators must be able to play a variety of roles: as obedient subordinate, innovative expert, responsive servant, and principled agent. Successful public employees stand ready to play each role as the performance expectations of the various audiences change.

Notes

1. This type of accountability, if it affords sufficient discretion, encompasses what Bovens (1998: 149) refers to as personal, social and professional conceptions of bureaucratic responsibilities.

2. The point of contention was over whether European or American firms should be allowed to buy the Westland helicopter company.

3. Executive Order 12862 required US federal agencies to define customer service standards, identify who agency customers are or should be, survey them about satisfaction, post service standards and measure results against them, establish best-in-business benchmarks, survey front-line employees, and make information services and complaint system easily accessible (Kettl, 1995: 54).

4. These changes included a reduction of supervisory personnel within the federal government by 30 percent and streamlining of procurement, disbursement, and regulatory enforcement procedures (Gore, 1995).

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