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*Introduction:
On Management and Metaphor*

Metaphors shape and constrain our thinking. We navigate our symbol-ridden, abstraction-drenched civilization using a brain that evolved to escort our ancestors through a bluntly concrete world. The human mind, doing the best it can in a job to which it's not entirely suited, "couches abstract concepts in concrete terms," as the cognitive scientist Steven Pinker puts it. Thirty-five thousand years ago a Cro-Magnon would have used the equivalent of the word *went* to describe the trajectory of a child toddling from her mother to her father. The modern sentence, The traveler *went* from Istanbul to Paris, is pretty much the same thing, scaled up. But the sentence, The meeting *went* from 3:00 to 4:00, is something else entirely, repurposing language that describes concrete motion through space to signify abstract transit through time. Pinker suggests that "a handful of concepts about places, paths, motion, agency, or causation underlie the literal or figurative meanings of tens of thousands of words or constructs."¹ Thus our choice is not whether to think metaphorically—there's no other option; we're simply wired that way—but rather what metaphors will prove most fruitful.

Metaphor and Management

So what sorts of metaphors might we apply to the challenge that a public manager encounters when attempting to use the resources she commands to create public value? Woodrow Wilson's classic dichotomy between policy (properly the task of elected politicians) and administration (the work of unelected administrators) suggests a mechanical—or perhaps more precisely a robotic—metaphor. Decisions made by duly authorized political officials control the actions of administrators, at least when the mechanism

is working as it should, as rigidly as instructions encoded in software control the actions of an industrial robot. The implementers exercise little discretion on their own, and the quality of their performance is strictly a function of how accurately they interpret, and how efficiently and fairly they put into effect, the instructions they receive.²

The Wilsonian decision/delivery divide, and thus the mechanical metaphor that once came unbidden to many minds when thinking about public managers, have lost considerable ground in recent decades. It is obvious even to casual observers that neither politicians nor administrators are as conscious of their cleanly demarcated roles, nor as disciplined about staying in their appointed lanes, as the Wilsonian image requires. Elected officials trespass into administrative terrain—requiring or forbidding this or that procedural tactic—and, even more chronically, neglect to complete their assigned work of deciding. Instead of resolving empirical disagreements and normative disputes to forge workable mandates, they paper over their differences by issuing superficially attractive but incoherent and incomplete policy directives, which compel administrators, willingly or not, to take up the decisionmaking work left undone.³

And even when politicians are able to reach consensus on mandates, they often find it impossible, inadvisable, or both to seek full control over administrators. The context within which a policy is implemented is rarely if ever entirely predictable, or even entirely describable, in advance. Cause-and-effect relationships are seldom sufficiently determinative to obviate the need for continual adjustment during the implementation process. So either political decisionmakers have to hover over implementers, available for continuous consultation. Or robotic implementers must receive their instructions in the form of infinitely nested tangles of if/then contingencies. Or the norm of lockstep, discretion-free fidelity on implementers' part has to yield and, with it, the mechanical metaphor.⁴

Unfortunately, the erosion of this metaphor leaves citizens, politicians, and managers unsettled precisely in areas where they would like to be certain. It is clear that we want government to act with a high degree of political responsiveness and legitimacy and also, no less important, with a high degree of efficiency and effectiveness. The mechanical metaphor divided the desiderata, assigning each to a specialized component of the government, and thus offered reassurance that both ambitions could be served. But if elected representatives cannot construct a coherent, articulate we from the Babel of separate, self-interested voices—and thus cannot give administrators clear guides to action—how can the twin goals of legitimacy and efficiency be advanced?

An alternative metaphor much invoked in contemporary scholarship on public policy (generally invoked implicitly, as metaphors tend to be) emphasizes skillful institutional draftsmanship—choosing from a diverse catalog of organizational models and structuring relationships among them in ways that (in a frequently invoked institutional imperative) “get the incentives right.” The implicit metaphor here is not so much mechanical as architectural. A policy goal is set—and many modern writers are less fastidious than Wilson on the question of by whom, implicitly or explicitly letting legislatures, courts, participatory gatherings, or academic experts fill this role—by desiderata derived from philosophy, economics, sociology, or another source of normative wisdom. Achievement of those objectives depends on selecting prudently from the various tools of government to mobilize whatever resources are required to accomplish the task and align motives in ways that induce each actor to contribute its required element to the overall enterprise.⁵ Policy draftsmen, who may or may not be elected officials, order up the components their blueprint requires—be they administrative agencies, tax preferences, regulatory codes, tort rules, or financial incentives—to be assembled into a purpose-built construct.

The architectural metaphor invites thought about how different tools of government can be used to alter a broad social production system by redistributing resources, rights, and responsibilities not only across government organizations but also across social sectors. Such an approach is rarely without relevance, and sometimes—particularly when a mission is at once urgent, well-defined, and novel—it is precisely apt. The Franklin D. Roosevelt administration’s series of New Deal creations for responding to the Great Depression fit this model. So did the large-scale government investment to develop the applied sciences that built the agriculture and mining industries of the country at the end of the nineteenth century. And so does the campaign launched through the 2009 stimulus legislation to promote electronic health record systems to reduce errors, increase quality, and reduce costs in the health care domain. What makes the architectural metaphor interesting and challenging is that it accepts the idea that the ideal arrangement for accomplishing an envisaged goal will rarely be available. The inventory of components on hand is usually inadequate to realize each detail of any new policy blueprint. As actors—some within government, some wholly outside it—make their responses to the architectural arrangements, they and the architects themselves make discoveries (both good news and bad) about the boundaries of the possible. Together, they find new means, and sometimes even new purposes, for collective undertakings.⁶

The Navigational Metaphor

Without dismissing the frequent relevance and utility of the architectural metaphor, we posit that an even more fruitful image—and one consistent with the scholarly work and professional worldview of many of our Kennedy School colleagues—is neither mechanical nor architectural but rather navigational. (The navigational theme, of course, also comports well with the central example of this book and its Coast Guard heroine.) The image we have in mind is not so much fully modern, GPS-driven navigation, which can itself fit the mechanical metaphor, as (if readers will allow us a bit of historical romance) the golden age of sail, when a captain gliding out of home harbor could anticipate weeks without landfall and months without fresh orders.

This is not to suggest, by any means, mere meandering. Every voyage had its purpose, whether martial or commercial: harvest whales, harass enemy shipping, transport trade goods, seek out new routes, seize territory. But the haze of uncertainty that surrounded each mission at its outset, the impossibility of predicting and programming for each impediment or opportunity, and the infeasibility of consulting authorities at home to resolve each choice as it arose meant that the captain had to wield great discretion. His task was to assess, day by day, his current situation and to choose the route with the best odds of advancing his mission. The modern public manager's situation is similar, in several ways, to that of the wind-driven mariner.

Imprecise Mandates with Retrospective Accountability

Lockstep adherence to advance instructions is no reasonable recipe for accountability when circumstances are fundamentally unpredictable. But that doesn't mean a mariner—or a manager—is free from accountability. At the end of a voyage, the captain of a sailing ship owed a reckoning to his superiors; the admiralty, if a warship; the owners, if a merchant vessel. Literal fidelity to orders was no reasonable touchstone; the orders that were issued long ago, before first weighing anchor, were understood by all concerned to be incomplete and fallible guides to action.

Instead, the ship captain would be judged on his ability to advance the mission he had been given in the face of the opportunities and obstacles that he later encountered. How wisely did he use his discretion, amid a sea of surprises, to advance his principals' interests? So, too, most public managers—at least those with any appreciable degree of seniority—are more accountable for results than for doing precisely what they're told. Legislation, regulations, instructions from superiors, and other embodiments of the public's mandate are inevitably flawed guides to action. A declaration like, "I followed orders

but obstacles intruded,” is rarely, if ever, an adequate response when called to account by superiors, the press, or the public at large.

Path Dependency

Actions undertaken and events encountered in the past both define the present and bound the future. As a sailing captain pondered what course to plot, his options were constrained by the trajectory that brought him to his current point. Can he accelerate his journey by steering for a latitude where the winds blow fiercely? It depends on whether his sails are new and sturdy or tattered from heavy use since the last refitting. Can he transit an exposed strait fast enough to dodge a looming storm? Not if his hull is encrusted with barnacles and weeds accumulated over the course of the voyage to date. Can he risk encountering an enemy and facing a fight? It depends on whether his crew has been tempered and disciplined, or traumatized and depleted, by actions in the past.

Similarly with public organizations: their capabilities are intimately shaped by their histories. The mighty American military, barely two decades after its triumph in World War II, proved humiliatingly incapable of defeating a ragtag insurgency in Vietnam. There were multiple reasons for the debacle, to be sure, but a major cause was the mismatch between the armed forces’ hard-earned operational capabilities and the very different requirements of counterinsurgency. The intelligence services, similarly, proved maladroit when required to pivot from the threat of Soviet communism to the threat of Islamic extremism at the turn of the century.

The past is no straitjacket; agencies can and do change, as the subsequent adaptation of both the armed and the intelligence services attests. But history puts limits on how far and how fast an organization can adapt. As one of us has written, the manager of a public library can quite readily amend the mission from providing access to media to providing a wholesome after-school venue for latchkey children. But there are equally valid public missions—decoding the human genome, deterring substance abuse, scanning space for rogue asteroids—unavailable to the librarian because the path her institution has followed does not equip it to pursue them.

Incomplete Information and Continual Adjustment

A mariner seeking to sail from Madagascar to Mallorca would not simply point the ship toward the northwest and forge ahead, in a straight line, for the days or weeks required to cover the distance. Even if the African continent weren’t in the way, he would know the general direction but not the precise bearing he should take. And even if he could be certain of the path

from his start to his goal, countless adjustments would be required in the course of such a voyage. Favorable winds or currents might make an indirect course preferable to a straight trajectory. Depleted stores of food and water might mandate a detour for provisioning. The chance to capture an enemy vessel might amply justify a deviation. Even if the captain never makes a choice distinguishable from slavish fidelity to the order to “proceed directly to Mallorca,” uncertainty about precisely where Mallorca was, relative to the ship’s current position, would require continual corrections almost up to the moment of dropping anchor at the destination. It is no accident that a sailing ship’s steering mechanism was organized around a wheel—that shape most capable of adjustments of any scale, from lurching reversals to barely perceptible refinements.

A wise public manager likewise is aware that the only thing he can know for sure is that there are things he does not know that will prove important to the success or failure of his mission. Eclectic opportunism in the face of surprise is a hallmark of effective management in unpredictable public sector settings. Briefly consider two examples.

The New York City parks commissioner, Adrian Benepe, was inclined by temperament and training to provide citizens with excellent parks the old-fashioned way: by hiring city workers to develop and maintain and staff the facilities. But budgetary strictures made the direct approach infeasible. And Benepe realized that parks could become focal points for socializing and status seeking among the city’s upper classes and the upwardly mobile. He eventually presided over a network of conservancies, volunteer groups, and “friends of” organizations—utterly unlike what he originally had in mind but successful in advancing his aims.

The Clinton-era labor secretary Robert B. Reich’s campaign against garment-industry sweatshops was stymied, at first, by shortages of inspectors. He eventually came to realize that high-profile brands and celebrity endorsers cared far more about reputation than about fines or injunctions. And his team figured out how to exploit that motivation. The anti-sweatshop crusade switched to a strategy of publicly shaming firms and individuals associated with abusive labor practices—a heterodox regulatory model that proved not only cheaper but also more effective than conventional enforcement.

Plan of the Book

Pamela Varley’s chapter 2 introduces our prototypical public manager and the problem she faces. In the wake of the September 2001 terror attacks

Suzanne Englebert, a captain in the U.S. Coast Guard, is assigned the responsibility for organizing a national effort—coordinated with international agreements—to improve port security in the United States. On one hand, this can be viewed as a straightforward managerial problem entirely consistent with the mechanical view of public administration set out above. The captain is a midlevel manager in a well-established and hierarchically structured federal agency. The mission of the agency includes managing the security of the ports, both as a target of enemy action and as a portal through which terrorists bent on destruction might pass. Consistent with this mission, she is assigned the task of doing whatever she can think of to do in the material world to reduce threats to, or via, the ports.

But as soon as one begins thinking about what would have to happen to accomplish her material, concrete objectives, much of the mechanical vision has to be abandoned. At the substantive level, the nature of the threat to the port, or passing through the port, remains uncertain. The means for defending against the threats are equally unclear. Standard ideas about what port security means include developing and maintaining a perimeter through clear boundaries, fences, and identity cards, for example. But it is not at all clear that the reproduction of this kind of perimeter control would be the complete, or even the most important, solution to the problem. At the operational and managerial level, Captain Englebert commands little except her own time and capacities. She can leverage these capacities enormously by orchestrating a broad consultative process that simultaneously seeks to comprehend potential threats, imagine useful responses, engage those who could act to thwart the threat in voluntary efforts to do so, and create a regulatory regime that efficiently and fairly distributes the burden of action among the large network of actors who could make a difference. But exactly how to do this, and what the possible results might be, remains uncertain.

Because there is no exhaustive inventory of public management challenges, we cannot say definitively how typical this situation is. Perhaps the problem Englebert faces is at an extreme along some continuum of public management problems, and testing management theories against this challenge would be unhelpful because it represents only a small subset of the problems that managers face. Perhaps the usual problems that public managers face are those that are well described by the mechanical model: the problem of reliably executing a set of well-known policies and procedures to achieve a predictable result. Our sense, however, is that while the problem faced by Englebert may be unusual in the degree and kind of challenge it represents, there are important features of this problem that are typically

ignored in the mechanical model and that have become increasingly important in the ordinary day-to-day management of government.

An eclectic orientation toward solving particular substantive problems is now more often the fulcrum of managerial effort than the pursuit of an organizational mission. An exclusive focus on the goals of a single organization is counterproductive when problem solving requires—as it increasingly does require—coordinated action across the boundaries of organizations and even sectors. This, in turn, often requires those responsible for solving a problem to innovate not only with respect to the technical means used to deal with a given problem but also with respect to the governance structures and processes that allow the necessary capacities to be assembled and deployed to achieve the desired results. Both the creation and the maintenance of the new problem-specific governance structures and processes often require a great deal of what can best be described as political (rather than administrative) work. In short, the kind of problem that Englebert faces is a key part of the emerging frontier of public management. The Varley chapter, by arraying with admirable clarity the fundamental facts of the case, enables the analytic work that the rest of the authors undertake.

Malcolm Sparrow, in chapter 3, draws on his extensive experience with enforcement and regulatory agencies to take us deeply into the operational challenges of dealing with risks and hazards that—rather than being targeted narrowly at some particular firm, locale, or demographic group—face the society as a whole. This is surely an important task of government but one that often goes underrecognized and undersupported because it succeeds by keeping everything as uneventful as possible. Being ready for emergencies, acting intelligently to prevent them, and lessening their impact once they occur are activities that (except when they fail) generally escape the notice of citizens at large.

Sparrow concentrates on the heterogeneity of the challenges we face, or more precisely, on the implications—both obvious and less so—of that heterogeneity. It is one thing to deploy against some single threat a response (or array of responses) that is known to be effective against that threat. It is quite another thing to face multiple threats simultaneously and to be obliged to fashion many particular responses to the respective hazards. Sparrow gives us the intellectual framework that an organization charged with mitigating risks would have to deploy to be successful. The world he depicts is one in which the managerial task is to organize structures and processes to support the constant reimagining of a variety of threats and the deployment of idiosyncratic solutions, rather than the creation and maintenance of an

organization that can do one preventive strategy with a high degree of reliability. In chapter 4, Robert Behn draws on his extensive research into what he terms performance leadership—a domain akin to, but distinguishable from, more familiar notions of performance measurement and management. He offers insights into how Captain Englebert might be able to convert her unwieldy and ill-defined task into something more manageable by developing objective metrics and a managerial system for using those measures to drive both the short-run performance and the long-run learning of the organization. While it would be nice to have a well-established measure of performance that could capture increments or reductions in objective risk for each port in the United States, Behn reminds us that this is not in the cards. He readily concedes that it would take some time and imagination to create even second-best, proximate performance measures for Englebert's initiative. But even if perfect metrics are unavailable, real-world efforts at performance leadership (inevitably incomplete, inevitably flawed) can help to advance Englebert's goals. It can help those who are part of the system that is trying to improve port security begin to feel accountable to one another and to the wider world for the accomplishment of that mission. Performance leadership can create the forums within which concepts of enhanced port security are debated, measures are constructed, and dialogue is created about the nature of the threats and how they might be prevented.

There is a notable complementarity between what Sparrow and Behn propose. The focus on performance with respect to substantive goals, the reliance on information systems to discover the nature of threats and what could counter them, the creation of forums within which this serious substantive work can be done that is at the heart of Behn's theories can be seen as a useful underpinning for the continuous learning that Sparrow recommends. But there is also a point of potential friction. It takes a lot of time and energy to develop and use a performance management system geared to the accomplishment of some particular set of results. Such systems are also alleged to work better when there are only a small number of measures. Both these considerations can lead to the development of performance management systems that, in the short run at least, become too narrowly focused on detecting one kind of threat or triggering one kind of response to a given threat. The challenge is to create a performance measurement system capable of dealing with threats and other tasks that are both heterogeneous and dynamic.

In chapter 5 Dutch Leonard and Mark Moore present a theory of strategic management in government that seeks to import—and adapt—for public sector use a set of managerial concepts developed in the business world.

While the term *strategic* conventionally evokes ideas like long-run, or big, or ultimate ends rather than means, Leonard and Moore argue that strategic analysis, as it evolved in the private sector, focuses managerial attention on the external environment in which the organization is trying to succeed. In a business setting, the chief feature of the external environment is the market composed of customers, competitors, and financiers. In the public sector, they argue, the most important parts of the external environment include the political authorizing environment, on the one hand, and the task environment, on the other. They also note that both the political authorizing environment and the task environment are heterogeneous and dynamic. Political aspirations and desires change with elections and even between elections. The conditions that public organizations face include many circumstances not easily handled by established routine procedures. Moreover, the conditions they face change with the times. This means that public managers have to think about positioning their organizations for value creation in a complex, changing environment. This puts a lot of pressure on the organizations not only to innovate but also to hold within themselves the variety of tasks they are expected to accomplish and to report against a variety of different dimensions of public value. The challenge for managers throughout is to maintain an alignment among a conception of public value they seek to produce, legitimacy and support for their conception of that public value, and the operational capacity needed to produce the desired results.

In chapter 6, John Donahue and Richard Zeckhauser observe how the capacity to accomplish public purposes frequently resides not in the most obvious unit of government—nor in any single unit of government—but instead is distributed across agencies and levels of government and (particularly) across the meandering and permeable boundary that divides the private sector from the public sector. They argue that an increasingly central task of public management is not the direct control of internal capacity but rather the orchestration of complex networks of capacity diffused across organizational and sectoral boundaries. And they invoke an uncommon metaphor for this work—the tumbler, an all-but-vanished profession once ubiquitous in Jewish resorts through the middle decades of the last century. The tumbler's job was to forge connections that would trigger the realization of latent collective gains: identifying shared interests, introducing compatible singles, catalyzing the formation of teams and groups of all sorts. Likewise with respect to some public missions—by no means all, but some of the most important—the interests of various stakeholders are reasonably well aligned, and collective gains are (as Donahue and Zeckhauser put it) shallowly latent.

In such settings, the public manager's work is akin to the tummler's task of helping stakeholders discover common goals and overcome impediments to their achievement.

Stephen Goldsmith in chapter 7 continues on the same general tack as Donahue and Zeckhauser. Like them, his point of departure is not a public organization and its assigned mission but a public problem the solution of which is likely to engage a large, diverse, and unpredictable constellation of actors within and beyond government. Goldsmith summarizes the conception of network governance, including the risks, complications, and downsides as well as the undeniable strengths of this approach. He then takes up Captain Englebert's story as an occasion to probe and illustrate some of the subtler and more sophisticated aspects of network governance. He casts the captain in the vital role as convener within the far-flung network—substantively similar to the prior chapter's tummler role, if a bit more dignified—and demonstrates how the convening function becomes the fulcrum for value-creating work in a networked world.

In chapter 8 Elaine Kamarck enlarges the discussion of the range of instruments and institutions that modern government calls upon to advance public missions. Kamarck begins with the uncontroversial theme that classic bureaucratic government is obsolete for many important tasks. But she follows up this conventional point with the less obvious but pivotal theme that Weberian/Wilsonian bureaucracy is being superseded not by any single new model but by a portfolio of alternative approaches to governance. She arrays three of these models: reinvented government, which is structurally similar to but operationally distinct from conventional bureaucracy; government by market, in which public tasks are pursued by weaving skeins of incentives to steer the behavior of private agents; and government by network, a notion akin but not identical to Goldsmith's. The trick, Kamarck observes, is to match public tasks to the right governance model. (In this sense, Kamarck's chapter—along with several of our other offerings—partakes of the architectural as well as the navigational metaphor for public management.) She then arrays the characteristics of port security against the criteria for the various models, in a nuanced and detailed application of her basic assignment approach, yielding lessons not just for port security but also for other urgent tasks.

In chapter 9 Archon Fung and (again) Mark Moore take on the knotty but urgent and inescapable question of where politics ought to fit into our understanding of the work of public managers. Their claim is that doing political work in the form of “calling a public into existence that can understand and

act on its own interests” is important for at least three reasons. First, it is only through political consent that we can be sure that the public values being pursued through the use of government assets are, in fact, valued by the public. Second, political consent is an essential condition to the flow of resources to a collective enterprise. Third, political mobilization can build capacities for coproduction that can increase the chance of success. Each of these, to be sure, is an instrumental argument for calling a public into existence. But community, of course, is often seen as valuable in itself, and the instrumental logic can be reversed: A collective enterprise can be valuable in part because it offers an occasion for building community around it.

What emerges from the collective commentary of these different thinkers is a chorus—sung not in unison but (mostly) in the same key—celebrating an appropriately complex conception of public management. This conception takes the perspective of the agent herself—not that of the social scientist—as the dominant analytic point of departure. It orients attention to the public problem to be solved rather than to the mandate of any one governmental organization. It insists upon the application of a diverse analytic tool kit and, in defining and pursuing public value, emphasizes the imperative of painstaking rigor and fidelity to evidence. It takes as an unremarkable norm—not the occasion for surprise or for staking claim to any novel insight—that the capacities of multiple organizations in both the public and private sectors will be engaged in the solution of most problems. And it focuses on the construction and maintenance of legitimacy in citizens’ eyes as the indispensable touchstone for valid public problem solving.

However anchored in the practitioner’s perspective this conception may be, we readily concede that it offers no fail-safe course to success for aspiring public managers. But that’s our point: Any claim to a simple, certain trajectory to effective public management trivializes the task. Our collective conception does provide a polestar or two to aid in orientation. Just as important, we think, it affirms both the value and the difficulty of the manager’s work. Our guidance will not, on its own, bring the manager and her mission safely into port. She must do a great deal of careful calculation—and sometimes plenty of dead reckoning—to chart her own true course. Calm days of straight sailing will be rare; endless tacks and threatening shoals will be more the rule than the exception. But the destination is worth the journey, for Captain Englebert and countless committed managers like her. And the rest of us are greatly in their debt. For many of the journeys that define our fate it is better to be in the same boat with our fellow citizens—especially with steady hands at the helm—than treading water, on our own, in stormy seas.

Notes

1. Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), pp. 352–55.

2. Woodrow Wilson, “The Study of Administration,” *Political Science Quarterly* 2 (1887).

3. In an extraordinarily large-scale but otherwise typical example, legislators enacted section 1302 of the historic Affordable Care Act of 2010. The lengthy section ostensibly defines the minimum benefit package that must be offered to count as health insurance under the bill. But beyond some general hand waving, the legislation basically says that the (unelected) secretary of HHS and her (unelected) staff would write regulations defining minimum benefits. When the regulations were released in 2011, they in turn left many of the hard choices up to the separate states.

4. A more tenable variant of the mechanical metaphor may be a cybernetic view of administration. Cybernetics highlights the kind of dense feedback and adjustment mechanisms that facilitate the concentration of decisionmaking authority without sacrificing implementers’ advantage with respect to implementation. Interestingly, the word *cybernetic* derives from a Greek word that means helmsman, aligning with our central metaphor here.

5. A canonical text in this tradition is Lester Solomon’s sweepingly ambitious edited volume, *The Tools of Government: A Guide to the New Governance* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

6. One of us has invoked a humbler and more realistic variant of the architectural metaphor for public management—that of the handyman who opportunistically exploits available bits and pieces to serve whatever latent goal they best fit—appropriately enough repurposing a metaphor developed by Claude Lèvi-Strauss.