Citizen, Customer, Partner
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For Marilyn
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Contents

Acknowledgments xi

Part I. Introduction 1

1. Citizen, Customer, Partner, and Public Management 3
   The Public’s Three Primary Roles 4
   Purpose and Plan of the Book 12

2. The Changing Place of the Public in Public Management 14
   Politics and Administration: Contrasting Perspectives 14
   Three Waves of Change 19
   Citizen, Customer, Partner: Three Essential Roles 28

Part II. The Public as Customer 31

3. Providing Customer Service in Public Service 33
   A High-Volume Activity 34
   Is It a Mistake to View the Public as Customers? 35
   Providing Good “Customer Service” 38
   Government’s Unique Customer Service Challenge:
      Whom to Contact and How 43
   The Promise of New Technologies 46
   The Benefits of Better Customer Service 57

4. Learning About the Public’s Needs 60
   The Value of Information from Government’s Customers 60
   Citizen Contacts and Customer Relationship
      Management Systems 61
   Citizen, Customer, and Stakeholder Surveys 66
   Focus Groups 76
Management by Getting Around 80
The Value and Challenges of Better Information on Customers 81

Part III. The Public as Partner 83

5. Coproducing Public Services and Public Value 85
   An Overview of Coproduction and Partnering 86
   The Range of Coproduction: A Sampler 91
   Why Coproduction and Why Now? 96
   Benefits, Costs, and Limitations 99
   The Limits and Potential of Coproduction 101

6. Managing for Coproduction 102
   Change the Outlook of Public Managers 102
   Simplify the Task 103
   Enhance the Abilities of the Public 106
   Provide Incentives for the Public to Contribute 106
   Use Sanctions as a Last Resort 112
   Toward Expanded Coproduction 113

Part IV. The Public as Citizen 117

7. When Is Public Involvement Desirable? 119
   The Evolution of Public Involvement 120
   The Debate over Public Involvement 121
   Assessing the Need for Involvement 126
   Getting Out Front on Issues 134
   Structuring a Supportive Decision-Making Framework 137
   Entering the World of Public Involvement 141

8. Engaging Representative Participation and Reaching Effective Decisions 144
   The Dilemma of Representative Participation 144
   Defining the Relevant Public 146
   Achieving Open Dialogue and Effective Resolution 158
   The Promise of Public Involvement 164

9. Techniques for Involving the Public in Decision Making 168
   Public Comment Periods 168
   Public Meetings 173
   Citizens’ Advisory Committees 179
Part V. Conclusions

10. Implications for Public Managers, the Public, and Democracy
    Working with the Public: A Summary Architecture
    When Roles Overlap: The Public as Citizen, Customer, and Partner
    A Need for New Skills
    A New View of Citizenship
    A Threat to the Public Interest?
    Citizen, Customer, Partner, and Democracy

Appendix. The Design Principles: Guidelines for Working with the Public
    Principles for Working with the Public as Customers
    Principles for Working with the Public as Partners
    Principles for Working with the Public as Citizens

References
Index
About the Author
Acknowledgments

This book represents the culmination of several decades of research on questions about citizen connections with government, focusing especially on how citizens and governments connect with each other and how those connections can be improved. Across those decades, I owe many debts of gratitude to those who have helped.

I was originally drawn to this area of research from observing Cincinnati’s vibrant community council movement during my time at the University of Cincinnati. I thank my colleagues there, Peter Shockett and the late Don Heisel, for introducing me to the community council topic and supporting my research. That research gave me insights into how citizens and governments could better work with each other, culminating in my book Between Citizen and City: Neighborhood Organizations and Urban Politics in Cincinnati (1986). Many of those insights and some of the stories from that research found their way into this book.

My interests moved next to the broader topic of how the public can be involved in decision making in public administration, the focus of my book Public Participation in Public Decisions: New Skills and Strategies for Public Managers (1995). I reiterate my thanks to many colleagues at the University of Missouri–Kansas City and Georgia State University for their support of that research. Chapters 7, 8, and 9 of the current book reflect a substantially updated legacy of that research.

In recent years, targets of opportunity explain most of my research involvements, but I have been fortunate that each of those involvements permitted me to expand on my core interest in the connections between citizens and their governments. As the most notable among these opportunities, my Georgia State colleague Ted Poister invited me to join him in what became multiyear collaborative research on the relationship between the Georgia Department of Transportation and its many stakeholders. I briefly summarize some of that research in several cases profiled here, cases that speak especially to the customer and partner aspects of this book. I thank Ted for inviting me to join him in this research and for the insights I have gained from our work together.
Another target of opportunity took me into research on 311 call centers and their Web equivalents, the basis for much of Chapters 3 and 4. Ted Greenwood of the Alfred E. Sloan Foundation connected me with David Eichenthal, then with the City of Chattanooga, Tennessee, and later the president and chief executive officer of the Community Research Council in Chattanooga. With generous support from the Sloan Foundation, David and I collaborated in focus group research on assessments by Chattanooga residents of the city’s revised Web offerings. I thank both Ted and David for their help.

Several other research opportunities also contributed to my perspectives on the customer side of this book. I conducted focus groups for Gwinnett County on issues similar to the Chattanooga work, with assistance from Joe Sorenson with the county. I also did survey research with colleagues Julia Melkers on citizen-initiated contacts and Greg Streib on e-government connections, in both cases resulting in coauthored published articles. I investigated the informational side of the customer dimension in scorecard research with David Edwards, then with the Mayor’s Office in Atlanta and now with IBM Global Business Services, and later in a white paper I wrote for Cognos, Inc. Insights from all of these efforts have informed this book.

On the partner side, I credit John Alford’s work for inspiring much of my thinking, in particular through his book Engaging Public Sector Clients: From Service-Delivery to Co-Production (2009). I also benefited from the thorough and meticulous research of a summer undergraduate intern, Naomi Klein. I have also had assistance from a number of doctoral students, most notably, Jungbu Kim and Jonathan Boyd.

I am grateful for the helpful comments from a number of colleagues who read parts of this book at different times, especially Guy Adams, John Alford, and John Bryson. I also appreciate the support of my department chair, Harvey Newman. I thank my wife, Marilyn, for her invaluable assistance as the most helpful and supportive reader an author could hope for. It is to her that I dedicate the book. She earned it.

I would be remiss if I did not also thank the many mostly nameless public administrators and public employees whose innovative work informs and inspires much of this book. In an era when public employees have become rhetorical punching bags, I am amazed on almost a daily basis at the many public servants who continue to innovate with the goal of better connecting citizens with their governments. I stand in awe of them; they deserve much more appreciation than they get.
Part I

Introduction
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1

Citizen, Customer, Partner, and Public Management

Today’s public managers face a public far more complex than their predecessors encountered. This public is more complex through its numbers, with more organizations and more people, and more complex in the interests those organizations and individuals represent, ranging from the concerns of traditional business and labor groups to the interests of citizen and public interest groups to the everyday service problems of individual citizens. And it is more complex in the roles those organizations and interests play in public management, with the most prominent of those roles being as citizens, customers, and partners.

Working with this public can be as simple as providing specific services for individual members of the public. Here individuals come as customers seeking discrete services, such as a garbage pickup when a collection is missed. At other times, public managers need the public’s help in producing services or pursuing public goals. Here individuals are asked to become partners with government, as by sorting recyclables from other waste prior to collection by government. On still other occasions, managers deliberate with the public to answer larger questions about what services should be provided or how government authority should be exercised. Members of the public then assume their arguably most important role as citizens, deliberating with public managers over the direction of government, as by perhaps debating whether to adopt new recycling programs. Frequently, too, public managers must work with members of the public in more than one of these roles at a time, as when people expect to be treated, like customers, in a courteous and helpful manner even as they also want to voice opinions, as citizens, on the nature of public programs.

These realities pose a dual challenge for public administrators. First, public managers need to understand the nature of the publics that they face, including what those publics expect in the different roles they assume as citizen,
customer, and partner. Since government is not about simply providing for people, that understanding should extend to what managers and their agencies may want or need to ask of the public in exchange.

As the second and more difficult part of the challenge, public administrators need to know how to interact with the public in each of the different roles. Most generally, administrators need to be able to work as "professional citizens" who "seek 'power with' rather than 'power over' the citizenry," as Terry Cooper (1984, 143) recognized decades ago. Thinking of themselves as professional citizens, public managers will be better prepared for working with the public as citizens, customers, partners, or as some combination of the three. Returning to the area of waste collection, public managers should be capable of (1) responding effectively to an individual who complains about garbage not being collected, (2) persuading residents to sort recyclables from waste, and (3) deliberating with the public over what recycling program to adopt in the first place.

This chapter introduces the issues encompassed in this dual challenge by profiling each of the three roles—what it entails, what problems it may bring, how managers might approach citizens in that role. Subsequent chapters are designed to deepen understanding of the several roles and to offer recommendations for how managers can successfully work with the public in each role.

THE PUBLIC’S THREE PRIMARY ROLES

Controversy persists among scholars and practitioners over how to view the public’s role in public management. When members of the public come to the administrative side of government, should they be viewed as customers or as citizens or in some other manner? What is gained or lost from the choice of perspectives?

The principal disagreement focuses on whether to view the public as customers or as citizens. On the one hand, proponents of the customer perspective see it as a means to make government more responsive to the public (e.g., Osborne and Gaebler 1993). If they think of the public as customers, public managers should presumably provide better customer service. On the other hand, those who favor the citizen perspective argue that the public owns government, making government accountable to citizens, as it would not be to customers (e.g., Schachter 1997; Frederickson 1992). For this school of thought, the customer perspective that fits the world of business obscures the nature of the public’s relationship to government.

But the citizen versus customer debate oversimplifies reality, since the public plays other roles relative to public management. Most obviously,
there is the partner role noted earlier, where a member of the public assists government in producing a service. When separating recyclables from trash, members of the public act as partners in jointly producing a public service, not as customers seeking a service or as citizens speaking to the nature of the service. Government also assigns members of the public roles as “regulatees” or “obligatees” as the subjects of regulations, as with speed limits imposed on automobile drivers (Alford 2009, 35). People who receive some kinds of assistance from government (e.g., job training) may assume “beneficiary” roles as recipients of governmental social services (Alford 2009, 34–36). The list could go on, too. Roberts (2004, 327–328), for example, differentiates seven “models of administration and the roles that citizens and administrators are expected to play in each of them,” labeling these as only “some of the better known models.”

Amid this array of options, this book will focus on the three roles the public plays relative to public management as citizen, customer, and partner. The logic for this choice is straightforward. First, as the coming chapters will demonstrate, each of the roles encompasses a substantial proportion of the public’s interactions with public management, and the several roles together cover most of those interactions. Second, as will be explained later, the three roles can subsume some other roles, such as those of obligatee and beneficiary, thereby encompassing even more of the public’s interactions with public management. Third, parsimony matters. Limiting discussion to three roles can simplify discussion, yet not at a substantial cost if those three in fact encompass most of the interactions of interest. The public manager who understands these three roles and knows how to work with the public in each should be well equipped to work effectively with the public as a presence in public management.

The three roles gained prominence in the discourse of public administration and management over a period of a half-century, beginning in the 1960s and extending into the new millennium. The profiles below take the roles in the sequence in which they arose, citizen first, customer second, and partner third.

The Public as Citizen

Item: After an explosion killed 22 residents and devastated the Roombeek district in the Netherlands city of Enschede, city leaders pursued “maximum feasible participation” of residents and displaced residents in planning the area’s future. Officials developed an elaborate “process architecture,” including “multiple participatory arenas,” and engaged a representative public, as citizens, in formulating and ultimately approving a comprehensive plan for the area. (Denters and Klok 2010)
The public probably plays its most important role in public management when its members participate in decision making, joining with public managers in deliberating about the nature of public programs and their implementation. Members of the public here take the citizen role, sharing responsibility for determining the course of government. The decisions they are asked to make could include: Should we create a landfill and, if so, where should we locate it? How should we balance environmental protection with desires for economic growth in planning development around a nature preserve? Or, in the Dutch case, how should devastated parts of the city of Enschede be rebuilt? This engagement may constitute the public’s most important role because it involves citizens in the core democratic function of deliberating the course of government.

On these occasions of what has become known as public involvement, public managers invite citizens to contribute their ideas on an issue, and share at least some decision-making authority with them. At its most extensive, public involvement engages citizens in formulating plans and proposals from the outset of an issue’s arising. In the Dutch case, city officials involved Roombeek residents before developing any plans for how the district would be rebuilt. In other cases, public involvement finds managers only consulting with the public, seeking ideas from citizens, but reserving the prerogative to decide. In the minimal case, officials may propose a decision to the public, asking for reactions to what may already be a fait accompli.

Contemporary public involvement dates to the 1960s when public administration became concerned about its supposed bias and injustice toward society’s disadvantaged. A combination of soul-searching from inside the field and legislative innovation from outside led to efforts to bring the disadvantaged into discussions of any public policies or programs that might affect them. From the perspective of its critics, public administration might improve its responsiveness through increased “citizen participation,” as it was first known, and public involvement in administrative decision making.

Although early citizen participation experiments often proved disappointing, requirements for public involvement and actual involvement of the public in administrative decision making both appear to have grown steadily since the 1960s. In the United States, citizen participation requirements had been attached to more than 150 federal programs by the end of the 1970s (Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations 1979), and other democracies were seeing similar trends. The public for its part also demanded more involvement, leading by all accounts to more genuine involvement of the public in administrative decision making in the United States and elsewhere.

Engaging the public in joint decision making promises a number of possible benefits, beginning with the greater likelihood that the public will accept and comply with any decision it helps to make. That acceptance could loom
large for public administrators, especially given growing concerns in the early years of public involvement over how to win the public support necessary to make program implementation work (e.g., Pressman and Wildavsky 1973). Feedback from the public could also better inform decisions, making for better decisions. An effective involvement process might also strengthen community capacity for future efforts, either between the community and government or by the community on its own.

Yet, public involvement in practice brought problems, too. Often those who accepted invitations to become involved did not reflect a cross-section of the population, sometimes instead looking like an odd lot of “the curious, the fearful, and the available” (McComas, Besley, and Trumbo 2006, 691–692). Public involvement could also be costly, at a minimum by requiring more time of public administrators to engage with the public, at a maximum by threatening necessary quality standards for programs or by raising program costs in order to meet the public’s demands.

Fearing these problems, many public managers have sought to avoid public involvement. They would be better advised to view public involvement as a contingent proposition. Public involvement in making decisions will be desirable under some circumstances, but not others, and the extent of involvement desirable will also vary with the circumstances. Extensive involvement and sharing of decision-making authority will usually be desirable only where (1) public acceptance of a decision appears necessary in order to achieve implementation, and (2) acceptance cannot be assumed without the public being involved in decision making. The degree of involvement desirable will also depend on such other aspects of an issue as:

- What are the goals of government on the issue? And what constraints (e.g., budget, technical requirements) must government impose on an eventual decision?
- To what extent is the public likely to support the agency’s goals and constraints?

When public involvement is invited, its success will also depend on who becomes involved and how effectively deliberations proceed. Can the involvement attract a representative public? Can that public be engaged effectively in discussing and resolving issues? Factors that could prove influential include:

- Identification and recruitment of the relevant public
- The range of mechanisms used for involvement
- Opportunities for face-to-face small-group interaction
- Use of a trained facilitator
Finally, public involvement also requires choices about specific techniques such as public meetings, advisory committees, and the like. As with public involvement itself, specific techniques tend to work better in some situations, worse in others.

**The Public as Customer**

**Item:** Some Department of Motor Vehicle (DMV) offices in the state of Missouri have adopted new “virtual line management” systems to reduce the need for members of the public, as customers, to wait in line. With these systems, mobile phone users “input a mobile phone number to hold their place in line” at the DMV office, freeing them for other tasks while waiting. Text messages then alert them when their turn has come. (Nichols 2010)

The mere mention in the United States of Departments of Motor Vehicles, the infamous DMVs, conjures images of long delays and unfriendly service. Many people can recall arriving at a DMV office in need of a driver’s license, only to wait for hours before receiving indifferent or hostile service. It is this kind of experience that helps to explain why improved customer service became a concern for many DMVs and other public agencies, too.

Interest in the public as customers of government developed in the 1990s as a component of another wave of reform in public administration. Where public involvement reforms sought to improve governmental responsiveness by engaging citizens in the administrative process, this next wave of reform focused on improving governmental performance, in part by making governments more subject to market competition. As part of a focus on markets, governments were advised to view the publics they served as customers and to aim for “customer-driven government” (Osborne and Gaebler 1993, 166).

The New Public Management reforms, as they became known, exerted an enormous influence on the practice of public administration in many countries. In the United States they inspired the Clinton administration’s National Performance Review (NPR) and the 1993 executive order encouraging all federal agencies to set customer service standards (Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents 1993).

The idea of improving customer service in government undoubtedly hit a sensitive nerve with the public, too. The many people who had suffered at the hands of DMVs or other insensitive public agencies provided a receptive audience for the idea that government should treat its public more like customers.

In coming to a DMV for a license or in going to many other public agencies, individuals resemble customers in two crucial respects. First, they seek
a discrete product or service, usually for its personal value to them, not for its value for the larger community. “In this model,” in contrast to the citizen role, “individualism and the pursuit of self-interest are valued” (Roberts 2004, 329). Second, a public agency is responsible for providing that good or service, sometimes for a price (the typical driver’s license fee), just as a private business might provide a good or service, typically for a price.

Based on this definition, more people may interact with government as customers than in any other capacity, coming mostly to the administrative side of government seeking discrete goods and services for themselves. At the local level in the United States, according to a variety of survey data, the proportions of residents who contact their municipal government in a given year with “a request for service or a complaint,” a customer-like behavior, are as high as 60 to 70 percent or more. Those proportions substantially exceed the magnitude of any other involvement with government (see, for example, Thomas and Melkers 1999; Hirlinger 1992, 558; Coulter 1992, 306).

The reasons they initiate these contacts defy full enumeration, but include (a) complaints about garbage not being collected, (b) complaints about potholes on residential streets, (c) inquiries about Medicare reimbursements, and (d) requests for information on recreation programs. In each case, the request probably reflects the caller’s personal need, not the need of any larger community.

In making such requests, the individual may expect to be treated like a customer, meaning with courtesy, friendliness, promptness, and as much help as possible. That treatment can be as important to them as whether the request is actually granted. As Van Ryzin (2011) found in a thirty-three-nation study, the process by which government treats people exerts much more influence on their trust in government than does the actual outcome people receive.

The lessons for public managers are clear. Wanting to serve the public well should lead to an interest in providing better customer service by being courteous, friendly, prompt, and helpful. Many public agencies already appear to provide this kind of service (e.g., Goodsell 2003, 24–29). Elsewhere, where public agencies have become estranged from their publics, better customer service may require a change in organizational culture, seldom an easy task.

Governments face a special challenge in providing good customer service: assuring that individuals who contact government can easily reach an individual who can provide customer service. When members of the public contemplate making a request of government, many questions can arise that typically do not occur when contacting a private business. For example, which government is responsible? Most people live under the jurisdiction of multiple governmental units, making the answer often unclear. Or, if the government
can be determined, which of its departments is responsible? If the department is clear, which phone number is appropriate?

Anyone who has called a government office for assistance has probably been passed from one person to another at some point. These questions point to a need for easily accessible and navigable systems for use by members of the public when they want government’s help.

Taking the customer perspective also leads inevitably to an interest in getting better information on customers (e.g., Osborne and Gaebler 1993, 173). What services does the public want—or not want—from government? How good a job does the public feel government is doing in providing specific services? Governments should attempt to learn more about the preferences of their public through the use of customer relations management systems, citizen surveys, focus groups, and other vehicles, and then put what they learn to work in shaping programs and services.

The Public as Partner

**Item:** In an effort to reduce costs, Australia obtained the assistance of citizens and some businesses, as partners, in increasing the use of postal codes on regular mail. On the business side, the country’s envelope manufacturers were persuaded to add four oblong boxes to each envelope, at no additional cost, where the postal code could be entered. The highly visible postal code boxes persuaded more people to enter postal codes on their outgoing mail, resulting in substantial labor savings for the postal service. (Alford 2009, 84–86)

A crucial mistake in the customer versus citizen debate has been to think that either or both perspectives could capture the essence of most interactions between the public and public managers. Public managers should think about how to involve the public as citizens in decision making, should seek to provide high-quality service to the public as customers, but should also consider what they need from the public to achieve government’s goals. Across a wide range of public services and programs, effective production and delivery requires contributions from members of the public. Without those contributions, without the public partnering in service production, services stand to suffer or fail.

This reality achieved scholarly recognition a generation ago in the brief popularity of “coproduction,” the idea that many public services can be effective only if produced jointly by government and citizens or citizen groups (e.g., Brudney and England 1983; Whitaker 1980; Sharp 1980). Crime prevention and education were cited as two prominent examples. Crime prevention
supposedly cannot be achieved by police action alone; it requires assistance from citizens and communities, an insight that inspired the spread of “neighborhood watch” programs. With schools, similarly, government can provide classrooms and teachers, but educational effectiveness hinges on students doing their part, preferably with the support of their parents.

After U.S. scholars mostly abandoned the topic by the mid-1980s, interest in coproduction recently revived among a new generation of scholars outside the United States. In both public and business administration, growing numbers of European scholars have taken up the topic in the last decade, often according it greater importance than earlier scholars suggested (e.g., Osborne 2010; Alford 2009).

Whatever the vagaries of scholarly interest, a need clearly persists at the street level for government to partner with citizens in the production of many or most public services. The partnership will sometimes be straightforward, discrete, and bounded, as when waste collection officials ask only that residents bag and haul their trash to the curb. Often, though, the requirements of partnering will be complex and ongoing, as when public programs designed to move individuals from welfare to work hinge on extensive efforts by clients in order to succeed (Alford 2009, 96–99). Government can provide training and arrange job interviews, but, for the program to succeed, clients must learn from the training and impress at job interviews.

Government needs the public to partner even in public information campaigns. When government uses these campaigns to advertise the risks of smoking or obesity or the like, success requires that members of the public partner by quitting smoking or reducing the intake of high-calorie foods.

For public administrators, the idea of citizens as potential partners implies a need to define for specific services what assistance is essential or would be helpful from the public. For the cases just cited, that assistance would involve hauling trash bags to the curb, applying job training in job interviewing, and quitting smoking or reducing calorie consumption. Defining the necessary assistance will sometimes require parsing the service of interest. What steps are necessary to produce the service, and what assistance from citizens is desirable or essential in each of the steps?

Where services will benefit from partnering, administrators should contemplate how to obtain the necessary assistance. The work of John Alford (2009) suggests a number of strategies, including:

- The task for citizens should be simplified as much as possible; the easier the task, the higher the likelihood citizens will be able to assist.
- Efforts should be made to get the word out to the public, both to explain why assistance is desired and to educate on how to provide the assistance.
• Appeals to normative and social values should be considered. Is it possible, for example, to encourage recycling by appealing to the value people place on having a cleaner environment?

Material incentives and sanctions typically represent the least effective strategies for encouraging partnering. Material incentives may induce circumscribed assistance on tasks that are easy to prescribe and verify, but will seldom lead to broader assistance. Sanctions may prompt cooperation only while prospective partners feel they are being monitored, and government seldom has the resources to monitor closely (see Alford 2009, 198–199).

Better structuring the choices citizens are offered can also encourage partnering. Drawing from extensive research in economics, psychology, and other fields, Thaler and Sunstein (2008) argue that people often make poor choices, especially on difficult and rare decisions, because they lack good information on the choices. Providing better information can improve those decisions, as when providing feedback on a household’s energy consumption substantially reduces that consumption (e.g., Kaufman 2009).

PURPOSE AND PLAN OF THE BOOK

For more than a quarter-century, students of public administration have debated how public administrators should view the public, whether as customers, as citizens, or in some other manner. This book starts from the premise that the public should be viewed as customers and citizens and partners. Members of the public approach government in all three roles, sometimes one at a time, sometimes two or more at once, and the three roles separately and in combination probably capture most interactions between the public and public managers. The effectiveness of public management and government depends on public managers recognizing and acting on this reality.

The purpose of this book is to address the dual challenge this reality implies, as defined at the outset of this chapter: (1) to help public administrators and other public officials to understand the nature of the publics they face as citizen, customer, and partner, including what the public expects in those roles and what government might expect in return; and (2) to provide recommendations for how public administrators can most effectively interact with the public in each of the different roles.

As that description implies, this book is addressed first to public managers and administrators, the officials who hold the principal responsibilities for how their agencies and governments interact with the public. However, the book may hold as much value for elected officials and street-level bureaucrats who, though at opposite ends of governmental hierarchy, interact
with the public as citizens, customers, and partners. In this age of blurring sector lines, the book should also interest many managers in the nonprofit and private sectors, especially those whose work with the public resembles the work of government officials. Finally, in all of those cases, the book is written to speak to international audiences, in essence to any public-serving official who struggles with how to interact with the public.

In the plan of the book, the next chapter will provide additional background by tracing the history of the citizen, customer, and partner roles in the literature and practice of public administration. A separate literature speaks to each of the three roles, although, as will become clear, the several literatures substantially overlap. The summary in Chapter 2 will place the three roles in the larger context of the history of public administration.

The bulk of the book will be devoted to examining each of the three roles in depth, both explaining what they entail and suggesting guidelines for how public managers might respond to each. In proposing guidelines, the book will take a design science approach. As Romme (2003, 558) has explained, “Design is characterized by its emphasis on solution finding, guided by broader purposes and ideal target systems.” In that spirit, the coming chapters will recommend strategies for public administrators to use in relating to the public as citizen, customer, partner, or some combination of the three. Those strategies will be presented as “design principles,” borrowing Ostrom’s (1990, 90) term for “essential elements or conditions for success.” Varying slightly from Ostrom’s usage, design principles here will be limited to essential elements for success that are or might be under the control of public managers.

In contrast to the sequencing in this chapter and the next, the book’s core chapters will address the customer role first, the partner role second, and the citizen role third. This sequence builds from the most basic (the customer role) to the most complex (the citizen role), taking the customer role in Chapters 3 and 4, the partner role in Chapters 5 and 6, and the citizen role in Chapters 7, 8, and 9. That approach facilitates using examinations of the more basic to inform understanding of the more complex.

A concluding chapter will explore the book’s diverse implications. Focusing initially on public managers, Chapter 10 will offer a summary for how to work with the public in the three roles, before examining how to work with the public in two or more of the roles at once and what new skills public managers and other public employees may need for this work. It will then turn to possible implications for citizens and citizenship, focusing especially on what citizens may have the right to expect of government and what responsibilities citizens might be expected to assume in exchange. Two final sections will consider larger questions about the implications of the citizen, customer, partner perspective for protecting the public interest and promoting democratic values.


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