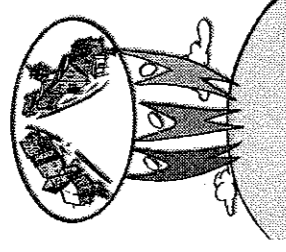


# Are You Being Served? The Responsiveness of Public Administration to Citizens' Demands



**Eran Vigoda**

*Intro: A survey of residents of a large Israeli city sets the stage for wide ranging questions about the very nature of public sector responsiveness. New questions are raised that attempt to place human factors into the responsiveness equation.*

Citizens' control over the operation of public agencies is a core necessity in every democracy. It cannot be attained when there is insufficient knowledge on the fit between what citizens desire and what governments offer.

Considering the fact that today, citizens of stable democracies are still committed to the social contract, the question of how governments fulfill their part of the deal and how sensitive they are to citizens' needs remains unclear.

We developed a study to estimate the relative contribution of numerous factors affecting responsiveness including policy, culture, and human resource factors.

## Responsiveness to Citizens' Demands

Approaches to the understanding of PA's responsiveness are controversial. Some studies describe responsiveness as, at best, a necessary evil that appears to compromise professional effectiveness and, at worst, an indication of political expediency if not outright corruption. While responsiveness is occasionally considered a problematic concept in PA literature it is undoubtedly critical to politicians, bureaucrats and citizens alike. A responsive politician or bureaucrat must be reactive, sympathetic, sensitive, and capable of feeling the public's needs and opinions. Since the needs and demands of a heterogeneous society are dynamic, it is vital to develop systematic approaches for its understanding. In many ways this is the key for securing a fair social contract between citizens and rulers.

Contrary to decisions made in the private sector, responsiveness in the public service must take into consideration social welfare, equity, equal opportunities, and fair distribution of "public

goods" to all citizens.

A main goal of this study was to determine ways in which the public sector could benefit from the experience of private organizations. This question has received much attention in the "new public management" literature, where responsiveness is defined as a synthesis of business considerations, public policy, and human determinants. Thus, we suggest two main groups of antecedents which may affect responsiveness to the public needs: (1) Public policy and cultural causes and, (2) Human resource determinants and quality of public servants. We focused on four factors from the first group: business or social orientation of the public authority, entrepreneurship and initiation of changes, internal ethics, and internal politics among civil servants. We focused on three factors from the second group: quality of leadership and management as perceived by clients/citizens, quality of employees who directly address public needs, and levels of stress reported by citizens when contacting public officials. Compared with the policy and cultural elements (macro level constructs), the traits of public servants are rooted in the micro level. This approach often describes the employees as the "organizational core" and view the quality of human staff as even more significant in PA systems where there is a direct confrontation between the tax payers and the civil servants. The human factor is examined in this study together with policy and cultural variables and is expected to have significant effect on attitudes towards the responsiveness of PA.

## Findings

Multiple hierarchical regressions provided some support for the research hypotheses. As expected, responsiveness and satisfaction were positively related to ethics and entrepreneurship in PA and negatively related to business orientations and interpersonal politics. A positive relationship was found between quality of leadership and man-

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agement as well as quality of employees, and responsiveness. In addition, satisfaction from service was positively related to quality of employees and negatively related to stress when contacting PA. This finding emphasizes the prominence of policy and culture in explaining general responsiveness. However the findings have also demonstrated that the dominance of policy and culture dropped when human-resource factors and quality of staff considerations were involved.

The main goal of this study was to narrow the gap between the normative and the positive approach to PA, and to suggest some plausible explanations for citizens' perceptions of responsiveness. The major implication of the study's findings is that PA theory may benefit from the separation of these variables into two different groups: policy and culture, and human resource and quality of public servants. While modern democracies cannot prosper without satisfactory standards of efficiency and effectiveness in PA systems,

our findings also show that the business orientations of a local municipality have some negative effects on perceptions of general responsiveness. The findings also show that citizens who believe that public policy is implemented according to clear ethical standards also perceive PA as more responsive and sensitive to their demands. Citizens who believe that PA involves internal political maneuvering that contradicts fairness and equity standards, also reported lower responsiveness of PA, as well as lower satisfaction from service and operation.

The study further suggests that while policy and culture continue to play a crucial part in postulating citizens' satisfaction and perceptions of PA responsiveness, the human side of PA makes its own independent and important contribution. Therefore, PA would benefit from an integrative strategy that considers quality of policy, programs and culture, as well as the quality of leadership and employees. Public servants' qualifications may create a helpful and kind environment that sometimes can cover for malfunction and problems in public policy or equivalent cultural characteristics.

Scholars argue that public organizations tend to have goals that are difficult to quantify, meaning that it is difficult to measure their outcomes. Considering this, measuring responsiveness of the public sector as perceived by its own clients/citizens is more of a necessity than just another option of measuring performances in PA. This information could help to improve future policy and administrative actions. It is important that administrators and scholars alike look for explanations of variation in the public will. These are among the most important tasks facing governments and PA systems in the next millennium.

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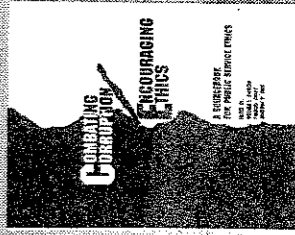


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