

Are Bureaucrats Leaders?
A Leadership Book Review

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In “Leadership of Public Bureaucracies: The Administrator as Conservator” Larry Terry claims bureaucracies have a role to play in solving public matters, and that leaders of these institutions have a specific, valuable role to play. Terry is a professor of Public Affairs, and in addition to prolific research experience has practical knowledge gained from public service in a variety of agencies. This book puts forward a normative foundation towards a theory creating a legitimate role for public bureaucracies.

Terry begins by defining administrative conservatorship as a specific category of leadership practiced by leaders of public bureaucracies. “Bureaucratic leadership is an active process that emanates from the executive branch and entails the exercise of power, authority, and strategic direction in pursuit of the public interest” (Terry 4). He goes on to affirm the constitutional legitimacy of the bureaucracy as the fourth branch of government, set up through the executive branch over time. According to Terry, confusion between heroes and leaders has led public perception away from bureaucrats as leaders. Successful administrative conservatorship is marked by slow change over time. He presents a continuum of leadership roles, from initiating to protecting, and leadership response should be based on what type of change is needed: from strategic to incremental. Terry defines three different realms which bureaucratic leaders must conserve: mission, values and support. Administrative conservators have primary responsibility to act as leaders in these realms. A successful leader will conserve the mission of his or her organization, retain the core values over time which adapting to

changing social values, and conserve support of the agency by elected officials and the public.

While the beginning of the book is heavily theoretical, Terry provides useful real-world examples in the second half of the book. The book may be fascinating only to those students of leadership who already have a special interest in public institutions. That there is a crisis in American public institutions is hardly a question. The delay in response to Hurricane Katrina is only the latest example of federal action, or lack of action, harming the people government is supposed to serve. While the current administration is finding ways to outsource government services, social, environmental and other problems are multiplying. These issues are being addressed by private business, NGOs, and in other developed countries. Terry's theory of administrative conservatorship provides hope and direction to those who believe bureaucracy has the ability to contribute to the public good.

Terry's theory fits in with contingency theory trends. He focuses on organizational and other characteristics, which according to Van Wart have been emphasized by theorists from the 1980s to the present (277). Stability provided by leaders of public bureaucracies reduces potentially disruptive changes that could come from elected officials following their party ideology. Leaders of bureaucracies often work in an environment of high external pressure. The public is watching as leaders struggle between maintaining institutional traditions, while adapting to changing circumstances. Sometimes a leader needs to make a strategic change, such as implementing a new program. For example, Sergeant Shriver was tasked by President Kennedy with implementing his idea for an international service corps, the Peace Corps. Subsequent

Peace Corps directors have needed to make incremental changes, preserving the mission of the organization while adapting to changing needs such as demographic background of volunteers and technical needs of the countries served by the program. Public bureaucracies need a higher number of leaders of the type that Terry identifies, with the ability to preserve and adapt, rather than leaders with a vision to create.

Distributed theories of leadership can also be useful to leaders of public bureaucracies. Public sector leaders often operate in an environment of conditional autonomy (Terry 48). Distributed theories focus on how a leader can minimize his or her role to maximize effectiveness. Especially relevant is the self-leadership framework, which asserts that individual attitudes, beliefs and motivations predict success. Self-leaders believe they will succeed and experience work as its own reward (Van Wart 363-368). A leader of a public agency may not have control over the mission or the type of work being done. However, he or she can control the atmosphere of the work environment and cultivate positive attitudes of followers. A Peace Corps country director who tells a new volunteer, “you are here to help people and you will have many opportunities to be successful,” sets up that volunteer with an attitude of success. When the volunteers are self-motivated, the director can focus on other tasks, such as monitoring the external environment, rather than the day-to-day work of the volunteers. Distributed theories are useful in large organizations, where a leader must delegate work to field staff working with minimal supervision.

Bureaucrats must be leaders. Leaders of public organizations may work in a constrained environment with scarce resources, but if they are not effective leaders a crucial public service will be lost.

References

Terry, L. (2003). *Leadership of Public Bureaucracies: The Administrator as Conservator*. (2nd ed.). Armonk: M.E. Sharpe.

Van Wart, M. (2005). *Dynamics of Leadership in Public Service: Theory and Practice*. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe.