

Best practices in public administration: how do we know them? How can we use them?

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Introduction

Policy makers, analysts, managers, and reformers have devoted great attention to identification of best practices and evidence-based practices in public policy and administration in recent years. Organizations and individuals have constructed 'Best Practices' compendia in various public policy fields. Efforts to promote best practices include the United Nations Best Practices Database in Improving the Living Environment (www.bestpractices.org), the United Nations Public Administration Network (<http://www.unpan.org/index.asp>), the National Governor's Association Center for Best Practices (www.nga.org/center), and the Council of State Governments' Innovations Awards Program (www.csg.org/CSG/Programs/innovations). A 2003 symposium in *The Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* highlighted four compendia and their uses, but also considered some of the differences among them (Bardach 2003). These differences--revolving around the level and type of evidence required to be considered a best practice, the source of the compendium, the focus on mechanisms or theory, and the incorporation of contextual background and intended audience--have the combined effect of suggesting that the meaning and utility of a "best practice" varies depending on setting and purpose.

There are several major issues in the identification and use of best practices. The first is the whole question of how best practices can be identified. How do we locate practices that work well and how do we determine that they work well? The preceding review of several approaches to best practices suggests the diverse pathways that are followed.

The second big question is whether they achieve the goals we want to achieve when practices and governance have multiple goals. Can we determine the multiple direct and indirect consequences of a practice? What constitutes a best practice depends to a considerable degree on the goals that are sought. A practice that will produce higher achievement of one goal may do so at the expense of another goal. One of the oft cited examples of this is the trade-off between equity and efficiency.

The third big question is how best practices can be transferred from one setting to another. Are they universal in nature? Does their applicability depend on time, place, and organizational context?

1. What are best practices and how are they identified?

There appears to be no consensus on what constitutes a best practice, how to identify it, or even what to call it. Bardach (2000: 71-85) offers an extended discussion of best practices, although he does not like the term, preferring instead to talk about smart practices. Despite Bardach's reticence, dozens of definitions and approaches show up in the literature. Bendixsen & Guchteniere (2003) suggest one useful definition, indicating that the term "relates to successful initiatives or model

projects that make an outstanding, sustainable, and innovative contribution to an issue at hand” (p. 677). They continue, “[Best practices are] about accumulating and applying knowledge of what is working and not working in different situations and contexts” (Bendixsen & Guchteniere 2003, p. 678). They further note that the term “best” has strong inspirational value, and “the purpose of describing and publishing a successful practice, and calling it a [best practice], is to make it function as an inspirational guideline, particularly with regard to decision-making” (Bendixsen & Guchteniere 2003, p. 678). So, best practices carry a tripartite function: 1) identifying successful initiatives addressing important issues, 2) learning what works and does not work in different contexts, and 3) inspirational guidelines for decision making.

We can identify a variety of approaches that have been taken to identifying best practices: looking at what appears to work elsewhere, examination of high performing organizations, use of experts, synthesis of literature, and scientific evidence. The approaches are not mutually exclusive and each either relies to some degree on an underlying theory or helps generate theories about how to attain high performance or other goals. Producers of best practice guidelines or compendia rely heavily on logic to establish some connection between the practice and desired outcomes.

Let us take a look at some efforts to identify best practices in management, public policy, and public administration.

1.1 Examination of high performing organizations

We can look at what many policy makers and managers do when looking for ways to solve a problem. Bardach (2000:71) puts it this way:

It is only sensible to see what kinds of solutions have been tried in other jurisdictions, agencies, or locales. One looks for those that appear to have worked pretty well, tries to understand exactly how and why they might have worked, and evaluates their applicability to one’s own situation.

Peters and Waterman’s (1982) book, *In Search of Excellence*, highlights a variation of this approach to identifying best practices. They set out to identify the factors that contribute to high levels of organizational performance. To do this, they identified high performing organizations. They then studied those organizations in depth to determine what traits characterized their management. It was a simple step from there to the conclusions that the traits they identified were the cause of high performance by the organizations. Along the way, they identified eight traits or attributes that seemed to distinctively characterize high performing companies. They identified those traits as:

- A bias for action
- Being close to the customer
- Autonomy and entrepreneurship
- Productivity through people, or respect for the worker
- Hands-on, value driven
- Sticking to the knitting, or doing what the company knows
- Simple form, lean staff
- Simultaneous loose-tight properties

Osborne and Gaebler’s *Reinventing Government*, a work that many took to be the public sector counterpart to Peters and Waterman’s work on corporate America, took a less systematic approach. The authors of that volume set out to identify governments, agencies, and practices that showed promise in addressing deep seated problems governments faced in producing effective, responsive services. They cast their work in terms of the perceived inability of bureaucratic organizations to respond to changing conditions, a gap between the demands made on government and the resources it has to address those demands, and a crisis of confidence in government. They sought out examples of practices that they believed were flexible, efficient, and restoring confidence in those places where they were practiced. Their approach lacks the systematic identification of high performers, but is consistent with practices public officials and managers often follow when looking

for better ways to do things. Like Peters and Waterman, they cast their findings as a set of general attributes they associated with successful governance. Like Peters and Waterman, they characterized those attributes almost as slogans:

- Catalytic government: steering , not rowing
- Community-owned government: empowering rather than serving
- Competitive government: injecting competition into service delivery
- Mission driven government: transforming rule-driven organizations
- Customer driven government: meeting the needs of the customer, not the bureaucracy
- Enterprising government: earning rather than spending
- Anticipatory government: prevention rather than cure
- Decentralized government: from hierarchy to participation and teamwork
- Market-oriented government: leveraging change through the market.

Their best practices were largely consistent with a broader reform movement called New Public Management that emerged around the globe in the 1990s. The movement was characterized by a drive to reduce bureaucracy, unburden the regulatory environment that constrained public managers, emphasize performance rather than process, and rely on competition and markets to enhance the delivery of public services.

1.2 Government Performance Project Approach

The Government Performance Project (GPP) is an ongoing effort to assess the quality of management or management capacity in American federal, state, and local governments. Project reports do not make clear exactly how the criteria espoused by the project were identified, but GPP clearly relied heavily on scholarly experts to identify the traits that signify high performance in the areas of budget and finance, capital improvements, human resources, information, and managing for results. The collaboration between academic scholars and journalists led to a set of standards or measures by which to assess the management performance of governments.

As elucidated by the GPP, the criteria for the first rounds of evaluation by the project (GPP, 2002.) were:

Financial Management focuses on budget allocation, forecasting, budget execution, accounting, financial reporting, debt management, and investment.

Criteria:

- Government has a multi-year perspective on budgeting
- Government has mechanisms that preserve stability and fiscal health
- Sufficient financial information is available to policymakers, managers, and citizens
- Government has appropriate control over financial operations

Human Resources Management focuses on workforce planning, hiring, retention, reward and discipline, and training.

Criteria:

- Government conducts strategic analysis of present and future human resource needs
- Government is able to obtain the employees it needs
- Government is able to maintain an appropriately skilled workforce
- Government is able to motivate employees to perform effectively in support of its goals
- Government has a civil service structure that supports its ability to achieve its workforce goals

Information Technology (IT) Management focuses on uses of IT systems in management: hardware and software performance, integration with other management systems, training, cost, and reporting capability.

Criteria:

- Government-wide and agency-level IT systems provide information that adequately supports managers' needs and strategic goals
- Government's IT systems form a coherent architecture
- Government conducts meaningful, multi-year IT planning
- IT training is adequate
- Government can evaluate and validate the extent to which IT system benefits justify investment
- Government can procure the IT systems needed in a timely manner
- IT systems support the government's ability to communicate with and provide services to its citizens

Capital Management focuses on long-term planning, initial construction or purchasing justification, capital and operating budget interaction, and maintenance.

Criteria:

- Government conducts thorough analysis of future needs
- Government monitors and evaluates projects throughout their implementation
- Government conducts appropriate maintenance of capital assets

Managing for Results focuses on strategic planning, performance measurement, and the implementation of performance information.

Criteria:

- Government engages in results-oriented strategic planning
- Government develops indicators and evaluative data that can measure progress toward results and accomplishments
- Leaders and managers use results data for policymaking, management, and evaluation of progress
- Government clearly communicates the results of its activities to stakeholders

A later iteration of the GPP altered the criteria for management capacity to subsume them in four categories: money, human resources, infrastructure, and information. In both iterations, the project identified specific criteria and developed a set of indicators for each criterion.

The GPP produces periodic reports assessing the degree to which federal agencies, state governments, and local governments meet the various criteria. These reports grade the units of government. The GPP has received extensive media attention and, partially because of that, focused policy makers and managers on important dimensions of public management. The one thing remarkably absent from the numerous reports of the GPP and studies drawn from it is any evidence that governments demonstrating high management capacity produce better results or inspire greater citizen confidence.

1.3 Synthesis of literature approach

A third approach to the identification of best practices is to synthesize the literature bearing on a particular practice or subject. Individual studies are assessed with respect to such criteria as validity and reliability and their conclusions are brought into a theoretical framework that can be used to guide theory, research, and practice. An excellent example of this is Rainey and Steinbauer's (1999) development of the elements of a theory of effective government organizations. Their assessment suggests that public organizations attain higher levels of performance when:

- Oversight authorities are attentive, supportive, and delegative
- There are favorable relations with other stakeholders, strong constituencies, and effective relations with suppliers and partners
- An attractive mission
- A strong, mission-linked organizational culture
- Stable, effective leadership

- Task design with intrinsic motivation and extrinsic rewards
- An effective human resource system
- Professionalism in the organization
- Motivation among members of the organization.

1.4 Scientific evidence approach

A fourth approach relies on scientific evidence from systematic, focused studies of the policies, practices, and approaches of interest. The language that is used with respect to these practices is evidence-based practice. Medical fields commonly use such an approach (Timmermans and Mauck, 2005), but managers, reformers, and policy makers are promoting it in diverse settings. Examples abound in criminal justice, mental health, education, social services, and elsewhere. One prominent example is the Drug Effectiveness Review Project (DERP) which generates evidence regarding drug efficacy or effectiveness by pharmaceutical class (Hall and Jennings, 2007). Fifteen sovereign states, a Canadian province, and a foundation have joined resources to develop this evidence-based practice measurement system and the states use the results in the management of their health care programs. The No Child Left Behind Act provides an example of a mandate for state and local administrators to implement evidence-based practices. The legislation requires that Title I school-wide and targeted assistance programs use effective methods and instructional strategies that are grounded in scientifically based research. The Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy (2007) of the Council for Excellence in Government has worked on criminal justice (<http://www.evidencebasedprograms.org/>). It began a collaborative initiative with the Justice Department's Office of Justice Programs to advance evidence-based crime and substance-abuse policy. The Council has also worked on education and social programs and has a web page listing a series of randomized control trials (RCTs) that it thinks should provide a basis for decision making: <http://www.evidencebasedprograms.org/>.

2. How do we know they are best practices?

Validity and reliability are critical elements of the scientific study of social processes and relationships. The concepts refer to the degree to which a relationship holds true, the degree to which the findings of a study can be replicated, the degree to which measures yield the same results with each application, and the degree to which a finding can be generalized. The concepts of validity and reliability Translate well into the world of best practices. In terms of best practices, validity would refer to the degree to which a practice actually produces its intended result. For example, if we switch from process accountability to outcome accountability, will we actually achieve better outcomes? If we switch from the use of a government agency to provide a service to contracting with private or non-profit firms to provide the service, will it be delivered more effectively and efficiently? If we implement a one-to-one reading program, will reading abilities improve?

Consideration of validity raises at least two aspects of generalizability. The first is whether a finding in one setting will hold true in other settings. If we find that a particular practice works in one set of communities, can we be confident it will work in other communities? If we find that a practice works in one country, do we know if it will work in others? The second is whether the particular features that characterize the practice can be generalized to a broader set of activities. For example, if we determine that early childhood education leads to improved high school success, what set of activities is it from the early childhood education that makes a difference?

Of course, much of the literature indicates that best practices may not actually be best and that what we typically seek are practices that will work or will improve on what we are already doing. As others have suggested, they might actually be called good practices, promising practices, smart practices, or innovative practices. Seldom do we have evidence that they actually are best.

While policy scholars tend to emphasize the importance of empirical evidence in identifying practices for adoption, that will normally be only one of many concerns for decision makers. As Hall and Jennings (forthcoming) point out, there are multiple criteria for selecting best practices, including fit with the local need and context, empirical evidence about effects, theoretical underpinnings, cost, and the level of risk.

3. What about multiple goals?

Recall that our second question about best practices is whether they can lead us to achieve the goals we want to achieve when practices and governance have multiple goals. Can we determine the multiple direct and indirect consequences of a practice?

It is generally the case that the identification of best practices focuses on a narrow range of desirable outcomes. For example, the search for best practices in solid waste removal may focus on the efficiency of different service delivery patterns. Is one service delivery structure better than another for moving waste from homes to disposal sites? Or, the search for best practices in management may dwell on internal agency outcomes without asking how the practice affects programmatic outcomes. The quest for efficiency can diminish attention to equality. Good examples of this show up in multiple settings with respect to a wide variety of practices.

Frederickson and Frederickson (2006) point out a particularly sharp instance of conflicting goals in their assessment of performance management in the U.S. federal government. They note that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has major goals that work against each other: “FDA is expected to enable pharmaceutical and food products to reach the market as quickly as possible while at the same time assuring that those products are safe (174).” Best practices insuring food safety may well slow the movement of product to the market. And FDA is regularly torn back and forth on safety and speed as different public concerns emerge. Serial attention to issues, as discussed by Jones and Baumgartner (2005), makes it exceptionally difficult to develop best practices that are equally attentive to all valued goals.

Particularly important in the context of governance is the fit of supposed best practices for policy or for program management with the needs of democratic governance. Responsiveness, citizen engagement, and accountability can work against implementation of best practices as identified through a study of the practices of other jurisdictions, the findings of scientific studies, or panels of experts. Democratic governance concerns itself with process, as well as outcome, and the demands of process will at times outweigh the desire for results. Just as psychologists and economists have discovered that individuals typically weigh justice or fairness over economic reward, so also may citizens prefer responsiveness and engagement to someone else’s idea of objective outcomes. In fact, some have argued that democratic norms, not efficiency and effectiveness, should be the central concern of administrators in democracies (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2002).

4. Best practices depend on context - they change over time and across setting

It is unlikely that best practices are universal, that their applicability is independent of time, place, and organizational, social, and political context. The goals that governments pursue, the balance among competing values, the relative degree of attention to competing values—like equality and efficiency, process and outcome—change over time. It is unlikely that best practices, which address goals and process, would be immutable. Adaptation is surely required. And, our knowledge about what works when is limited, suggesting the desirability of caution in the application of best practices.

This latter point is well illustrated by Maynard (2006) in a discussion of what it will take for decision makers to care about evidence. She points to three important policy questions (249-250): “Are there things that could and should be done to improve the neighborhoods where children live? ...Are pregnancy prevention programs effective in delaying sexual debut, in reducing pregnancy risk, and in reducing pregnancy? ...Will giving parents vouchers that can be used to defray the costs of

sending their children to private schools lead to improved educational outcomes for children?" What she finds in examining extensive evidence bearing on these questions is the evidence is mixed, depends on exactly what question is asked, and differs with the context. She suggests that: (1) the important questions change over time; (2) it is important to accumulate evidence; (3) the best lens for framing questions and interpreting evidence can change; (4) context makes a difference when we frame questions, design research, and interpret findings.

The lesson here is that best practices have to be viewed carefully. Policy makers and managers intent on following best practices not only have to identify what those practices might be but have to ask whether they address the issues of concern, will work in the local context, and require adaptation to achieve desirable results. They need to concern themselves with side effects and potential unintended consequences. While some best practices may be universal in nature, many are not.

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