



*Managing Organizations to Sustain Passion
for Public Service*

Almost three decades ago, James Perry created the first survey instrument to measure public service motivation. Since then, social and behavioral scientists have intensively studied the motivating power of public service. This research relating to public service motivation, altruism and prosocial motivation and behavior has overturned widespread assumptions grounded in market-orientated perspectives and produced a critical mass of new knowledge for transforming the motivation of public employees, civil service policies and management practices. This is the first study to look systematically across the different streams of research. Furthermore, it is the first study to synthesize the research across the applied questions that public organizations and their leaders confront, including: how to recruit ethical and committed staff; how to design meaningful public work; how to create work environments that support prosocial behavior; how to compensate employees to sustain their public service; how to socialize employees for public service missions; and how to lead employees to engage in causes greater than themselves.

JAMES PERRY is Distinguished Professor Emeritus at the Paul H. O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs, Indiana University. He pioneered research on public service motivation, now studied in more than fifty countries, and is recipient of the Dwight Waldo Award (ASPA), the H. George Frederickson Award (PMRA), the John Gaus Award (APSA), and the Routledge Prize (IRSPM).

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James L. Perry
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Managing Organizations to Sustain Passion for Public Service

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This book is dedicated to my most cherished public servants, my daughters, Jennifer and Jacqueline. They have made an enormous difference to many – the people they serve, their wonderful husbands and children, and their mother and dad.

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Acknowledgments

The journey that brought me to this book began in the late 1980s. At the time I joined with my School of Public and Environmental Affairs (now the Paul H. O'Neill School) colleague Lois Wise to contribute an article to the fiftieth anniversary volume of *Public Administration Review* (PAR). The article, “The Motivational Bases of Public Service,” launched my attention to public service motivation, an enterprise to which I have devoted a good share of time during the last three decades.

I have had the good fortune of several sabbatical leaves that were influential in shaping the path that led to this book. In fall of 1992 I worked for the late Tom McFee, Assistant Secretary for Personnel at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, getting firsthand exposure to federal human capital management and simultaneously thinking about measuring public service motivation. Tom was a great mentor, teacher, and person. I moved on from Washington in the winter of 1993 to the Robert M. LaFollette School of Public Affairs where I first developed a scale to measure public service motivation. I spent 1999–2000 at the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) as an outgrowth of my early empirical research on public service motivation, which involved the AmeriCorps national service program. In 2006–2007, I was invited by colleagues at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU Leuven) to continue my research on public service motivation as senior postdoctoral fellow. My stay in Leuven also permitted me to develop a network of colleagues across Europe (and a love for Belgian beer!).

When the volume of research about public service motivation grew during the 1990s and 2000s, I embarked with colleagues on a chapter for a book I coedited in 2008. The book chapter, “From Theory to Practice: Strategies for Applying Public Service Motivation,” which I coauthored with Laurie Paarlberg and Annie Hondeghem, is a distant precursor of this book, but it was written in the spirit of coupling practice more closely to theory and empirical research.

Writing this book gained serious momentum when I coauthored a *Public Administration Review* article, “Public Service Motivation Research: Lessons for Practice,” with Laurie Paarlberg and Robert Christensen. The article again focused on the question of applying research about public service motivation to management practices in public organizations. It was not long after the article appeared that I decided to write this book.

The collaborations I refer to above represent both distant and proximate stimuli for this book. Lois Wise partnered with me to get the stream of research off the ground, long before public service motivation became a common part of public administration conversations. Annie Hondeghem, Director of the Public Governance Institute at KU Leuven, collaborated on both the 2008 edited book and the chapter that appeared in it. She was my gracious host during my senior postdoctoral fellowship at KU Leuven in 2006–2007.

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Finally, my thanks to my family for their support. My thanks, too, to my wife, Wendy. She tolerates all the time I spend in my “cave.”

Foreword

For much of my career, I have called public institutions “home.” Public service is enormously consequential, a critical pillar of a functioning democracy. Volcker Alliance Nonresident Senior Fellow Paul Light’s research makes this point vividly. As the new millennium approached, Light surveyed the U.S. federal government’s greatest achievements. Among them were rebuilding Europe after World War II, promoting scientific and technological research, and increasing older Americans’ access to health care. His list of the fifty greatest achievements is impressive (www.brookings.edu/research/governments-greatest-achievements-of-the-past-half-century/).

More recently, Light turned his attention to government failures, identifying forty-eight significant failures between 2000 and 2015 (wagner.nyu.edu/files/faculty/publications/Light_Cascade_of_Failures_Why_Govt_Fails.pdf). Since 2010 alone, he points to the Deepwater Horizon Gulf oil spill, Texas fertilizer plant explosions, and the failed launch of the Affordable Care Act’s Healthcare.gov. The pattern, in Light’s view, is that the pace of failures is steadily increasing.

Nothing magical or mysterious determines government’s successes or failures. Results do not just appear from a top hat or a black box. Successes and failures flow instead from good or bad ideas, preparation or lack thereof, and having or not having the right human capacity for the situation at hand. What I have learned from our work at the Volcker Alliance is that the human capital in government – the public service – on which we have long relied is increasingly threatened. A 2018 joint report released in collaboration with the Partnership for Public Service, *Renewing America’s Civil Service* (www.volckeralliance.org/recommendations-renewing-americas-civil-service), argued that despite the enormous technological advances of the last half century, the U.S. government relies on a civil service system designed largely for a clerical workforce. Similar stories about the technological and process limitations of civil services emanate from capitals globally.

For much of his distinguished public service career, Paul A. Volcker confronted the dual realities to which I refer above. He was well aware of the noble purposes of public work and simultaneously mindful of the practical challenges to realizing them. His commitment to advancing effective management of government to deliver results that matter to citizens is what drove him to found the Volcker Alliance. His practical grounding, however, often led him to caution colleagues with a quote he attributed to Thomas Edison, “Vision without execution is hallucination.”

This book, *Managing Organizations to Sustain Passion for Public Service*, by the accomplished public administration scholar, James Perry, is an encouraging bridge between the promise of reliable execution of public services and policies that advance the common good and the public sector workforce Paul Volcker envisioned – a workforce with the preparation, experience, and commitment to ensure government is accountable and delivers excellence.

Professor Perry begins by drawing from three decades of research about public service motivation, as well as research about prosocial motivation and altruism. This behavioral and social science research, Perry argues, transforms the intellectual framework for designing civil service systems.

Although Perry’s journey originates from a different place, he arrives at recommendations that are comprehensive and converge with many ideas articulated in *Renewing America’s Civil Service*. Among these are: using probationary periods to validate selection decisions, designing and managing job security to balance performance and property rights, making performance an important criterion for reductions-in-force, creating more pronounced wage dispersion for high-skill occupations and executives, and designing onboarding to align organizational and employee public service values.

Professor Perry observes in the concluding chapter that some of his proposals are traditional, others are novel, and still others are solidly grounded in theory but have largely been untried in the public sector. A unifying foundation for all his proposals is the merit principle: recognition that civil service systems are most effective when they are designed as autonomous units staffed by competent and experienced members. It is reassuring that merit principles remain the foundation for rediscovering the public service ethos even as new behavioral and social science evidence materializes. In fact, I am struck by the irony of

Dr. Perry's argument that the design of merit systems, which are often criticized as unresponsive and unaccountable, creates an environment for members to fulfill their basic psychological needs. This realization helps explain why well-designed civil service systems have endured and delivered effective results despite the often-heard criticisms.

A fascinating revelation of the book is the growing body of experimental evidence Dr. Perry cites how motives associated with public service can make a difference for a range of behaviors important to public employees, their leaders, and managers. Dr. Perry draws upon four dozen experimental studies of individuals, jobs, work settings, and leader behaviors. Although the experimental evidence is not definitive, it gives readers a clearer sense of consequences associated with particular policies and behaviors. His concluding chapter includes, too, a call for expanding experimentation – and more partnerships between practitioners and scholars – as a means for expanding the base of knowledge about what works.

As I note above, *Managing Organizations to Sustain Passion for Public Service* is an important bridge between public purpose and policy execution. It is also a bridge built on James Perry's thirty years of research about public service motivation. This book comes at an important time when more Americans are realizing the critical role government plays in their lives and when the focus on a well-prepared, talented, and innovative government workforce has been reawakened. The book begins to fill voids in the intellectual capital needed to redesign our civil service systems and reinvigorate human resource policies and public management. The book is a welcome addition to our tool kit for improving government performance. I look forward to observing how James Perry's spotlight on making a difference through public service inspires passion for government, public organizations, and public employees in the future.

Thomas W. Ross
President
The Volcker Alliance

Thomas W. Ross is President of the Volcker Alliance. He served as President of the University of North Carolina from 2011 to 2016, and as President of Davidson College from 2007 to 2010. Mr. Ross is also Sanford Distinguished Fellow in Public Policy at the Duke University Sanford School of Public Policy.

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