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The Public Sector Service Dilemma

by Ken Embley

Question—when can you do something that is the right thing to do and get yourself in trouble for doing so? **Answer**—when you lead your agency in the provision of effective and efficient public service. The **hope**—is to do the right thing anyway.

Welcome to the public sector service dilemma where the implied and the politically correct directions are—act like a business and care for our citizens (unless, you have more business than you have resources). Ah...**the public sector service dilemma**—do you really provide effective and efficient one-on-one service to citizens utilizing the limited resources available to an agency while other critical duties and responsibilities go undone.

The service dilemma exists for almost any public sector service provider but let us get specific and look at a service dilemma that confronts my good friend Jerry Olds, State Engineer/Director, Division of Water Rights.

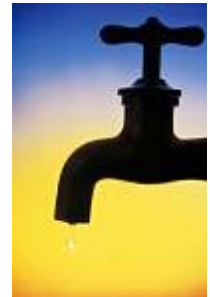
Managing the water rights application process is a public sector service dilemma nightmare. The regulation of water rights is a complex and specialized field. As a result, assistance is required to maneuver through the application process. There are conflicting interests to manage, requirements to meet, and other challenges for the Division and the applicant. As a result, Division staff spends many hours working with applicants to “hold their hands” through the process and applicants appreciate the help. The definition of quality service revolves around the applicant and the perceived quality of the one-on-one service.

At this point, you might be saying to yourself—where is the service problem? The answer—this type of one-on-one service is both ineffective and inefficient. In fact, some might say taxpayers are subsidizing the interests of a water rights applicant while at the same time the circumstances require the Division to ignore other, but less visible, water rights processes or issues.

Jerry is stuck with a service dilemma. In order to provide good service, should Jerry try to purchase more “hand holding” assets to meet the one-on-one service expectation? On the other hand, should Jerry try to invest in service technology that can satisfy the service need but not the “hand holding” service expectation? If Jerry had unlimited resources, he could do both but the reality is that he does not have unlimited resources and he must make difficult decisions to resolve this public sector service dilemma.

One might be tempted to say, this is a no brainer; do the right thing and introduce the applicant to service technology—create some type of Turbo-Water software program to meet the needs of applicants (just as a Turbo-Tax software package meets the service needs of some taxpayers). However, Jerry knows better. The first time an important constituent needs to spend some of their resources to acquire a water right, Jerry will get pressure from many directions to provide “hand holding” service and he and his Division is stuck with the pressure to provide and maintain ineffective and inefficient service systems.

Now let us get Jerry off the hook here; he is not the only person in the public sector who faces this type of service dilemma. It seems that we citizens want effective and efficient government but when it comes down to it—the slogans and the rhetoric really apply to the other person. As



a result, if you are in the public sector, you and your agency will likely have public sector service dilemma challenges.

The solution is not simple but some of the steps are clear:

- Identify your agency service dilemmas;
- Develop courage to address each service dilemma in a straight forward manner (balancing efficiency and effectiveness with available resources, then redefining agency service relationships); and
- Provide vision to guide your agency through the inevitable tough times.

The plain fact is public service agencies will have more business than resources to manage the demand—ah...***the public sector service dilemma***. The ***hope***—is to do the right thing by consciously addressing the dilemma and striving for the provision of both effective and efficient public sector service.

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