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Perspective

Interfaces: How to Connect Effectively with Citizens

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When citizens interact with agencies—for taxation, social benefits, licenses, permits, and so on—the complexity of rules, procedures, and (web)formuli is a major problem. The complexity of the world of "systems" of our public sector does not easily match the world of "real lives"— the varied lives of individuals. Administrative systems focus on regularity, equality, and the processing of huge numbers of individual cases. All elements of the administrative process are formalized. If something cannot be formalized, if it does not fit in the system, it does not exist. Human beings value predictability, but are not made for formality. Consequently, there is a structural tension or misfit between complex administrative systems and citizens.

Effective human interplay with complex systems is a key issue in the IT world. Our smart phone is an extremely complex system, as our "personal" computer used to be. No expert in the world can understand all of the elements that determine the functioning of a smart phone. Such complex systems, however, are used widely and they are a tremendous success. Why? Because step-by-step interfaces have been designed that connect the IT systems world of smart phones with the lives and "life worlds" of users. It started with keyboards, the mouse, and icons, and now we are intimately connected with our digital gadgets by touch screens, "apps," and even voice interaction. Although complex and formal in its nature, these systems are able to connect with users in an intuitive way. Interfaces connect the complex IT world effectively with the life world of all of us. This concept of *interface* appears to be essential.

As National Ombudsman in the Netherlands I have dealt with tens of thousands of citizen complaints about the malfunctioning of agencies at central, regional, and local levels. Frustration and distrust burst from citizens' mail, letters, and phone calls. According to the Dutch General Administrative Law Act, citizens can launch a complaint by a signed letter.

The law stipulates a well-organized procedure for complaint handling. After a year or more, citizens can expect the decision of the Ombudsman: unfair treatment, yes or no. A perfect procedure but citizens were not as satisfied with this approach as one might expect. Why? Because it ignores their real questions: why did they launch a complaint and what result would they like to achieve?

The answers can be found by carefully listening to complaining citizens and their intermediaries (lawyers, volunteers, churches, etc.). Complexity appeared to be an important issue. A lack of understanding triggers distrust. We need to establish more effective interfaces between citizens and complex administrative systems—but how? On the basis of much experience, I discovered four essential elements.

The first one is *personal contact*. When administrative procedures do not function well and when there are problems, a simple—if possible quick—phone call will help, and when agencies face severe cases, eye-to-eye contact is very effective.

The second element is *taking citizens seriously*: listen and do not deny what they bring up. This is something different from admitting that they are right. If someone is disturbed because he did not understand a formal letter, that issue is a fact. And the reader might be right and the (standard) letter might need to be rewritten. As Ombudsman I cooperated with agencies to send millions of letters in clear language, something that proved to be quite cost-effective.

The third element is *fair treatment*: be respectful to citizens. This is the core of the work of the Ombudsman: listening, being careful with data, giving understandable reasons for a decision, respecting human rights. Decisions should not only be legally correct but *fair* as well in the sense that citizens perceive procedural fairness in the operations of agencies.

The fourth and final element of the interface is *trust in citizens*. Administrative systems have a tendency to be overanxious about cheating or even law-breaking citizens. This is a questionable attitude, as the majority of citizens are trustworthy, in the sense that they do not violate the law. The head of the Scientific Research Center of the Dutch ministry of Justice (WODC) told me that from all citizens between 18 and 80 only 1.34 percent are annually subjected to criminal investigation as suspects or are convicted of crimes (traffic offenses excluded). A very large majority of our citizens has no bad intentions.

A couple of years ago, the Rotterdam police force asked for research on citizen satisfaction with regard to police services. The research institute decided to include traffic offenses. Surprisingly, more than 70 percent of the offenders were satisfied with police services even in the negative case of traffic ticketing (they are just doing their job). If they were not satisfied, they felt not treated fairly or they were not taken seriously. A police officer can listen to an apology of a traffic offender but be persistent in fining, without generating complaints.

All in all, effective interfaces in public administration make use of personal contacts, take citizens' interests seriously, are respectful and fair, and are built upon trust in citizens.

What are the implications? In applying the General Administrative Law Act, most agencies have learned that lengthy formal procedures can be reduced to an informal approach with effective interfaces with citizens. The office of the Ombudsman changed its policy: no more priority to lengthy written procedures, but direct personal contact, aimed at problem solving. In the Netherlands, health-care organizations are showing interest in this approach. Even Dutch administrative and civil courts have adopted comparable informal approaches. At the beginning of court sessions, many judges simply focus on the question, "what is your problem and how can this be solved?"

Our complex public administration has a strong tendency to stress formality. The life world of citizens is characterized by informality. When agencies and administrations insert informality into their contacts with citizens, a more effective connection between systems and lives of citizens can be achieved and the transaction cost of administrative actions can be reduced.

Author's Note

This Perspective is based upon Alex Brenninkmeijer's Edge Talk at the 2016 conference of the European Group for Public Administration at Utrecht University.