



# Prop Masters or Puppeteers? The Role of Public Servants in Staging a Public Value Review

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## Abstract

The ideas of Public Value Management have expanded the scope of ambitions and actors involved in government. Public, private, and community partners increasingly join forces to achieve societal outcomes. Yet the measures and processes for reviewing the impact of these collaborations have lagged behind. Reviews traditionally center on politicians holding the executive to account on specific promises, ignoring the wider constellation of actors and ambitions now at play.

Public value reviews should entail multiple public, private, and community actors holding each other to account for their contribution to the desired societal outcomes. New routines and arenas are needed to enable such wider reviews, while existing political procedures and democratic forums must remain insured and respected.

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This chapter examines what public value reviews could look like by exploring how the various actors can come together to explicate their goals, exchange and examine performance information, and explore actions for future improvements. The idea of public value reviews is made concrete by looking at summits, where the various partners literally gather to jointly reflect on their collective impact.

The chapter focuses specifically on the role of public servants in preparing and staging these summits. Public servants play a key part by (1) getting the right people together, (2) helping to explicate goals, (3) providing useful data props to inform the discussion, and (4) distribute the insights of the review to a wide audience. However, public servant must be careful to not overstep their mandate, becoming the backstage “puppeteers” of public value reviews.

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### Keywords

Public Value Management · Collaborative governance · Performance review · Collaborative performance summit · Public servants

All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts.  
(From “As You Like It,” Act II Scene VII, by William Shakespeare)

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## 1 The Challenges of Reviewing Public Value Creation

Public Value Management sprung from an attempt to broaden the ambitions of government beyond the emphasis on procedures of Traditional Public Administration or the focus on outputs of New Public Management (Bryson et al. 2014). Public Value Management argues that government should aim for nothing less than the creation of “societal desirable outcomes” (Moore 1995, 2013). Governments should strive for the realization of public goods such as poverty reduction, public health improvements, and ecological advancing, while at the same time retaining democratic legitimacy, procedural fairness, and decision-making transparency (Page et al. 2015).

Public value management also broadens the perspective on what actors should be involved in delivering and authorizing this public value. The “operational capacity” for delivering public goods is not the exclusive domain of public agencies; private actors and community are essential partners for co-designing and co-delivering societal solutions (Alford and Yates 2014). Equally, public, private, and community actors must all be involved in sanctioning and reviewing the value creation as they are all part of the broader “authorizing environment” (Moore 1995, 2013).

The public value perspective has broadened the ambitions and actors involved in government, yet the mechanisms for reviewing what value has been created have remained comparatively narrow. Traditional Public Administration provides elected politicians with (supposedly) precise mechanisms for holding the executive to account on specific promises and norms. New Public Management provides

(seemingly) clear and crisp targets to measure performance. However, reviewing public value reviews would have to involve more actors than just the legislature and the executive (Page et al. 2015) and would have to consider more dimensions of value than can be captured in narrow performance indicators (Bryson et al. 2014). Using the existing narrow routines could stifle the broader approach to government envisioned by Public Value Management, yet the democratic legitimacy of the existing review mechanisms can also not be ignored. In short, there is a need for new mechanisms for reviewing public value.

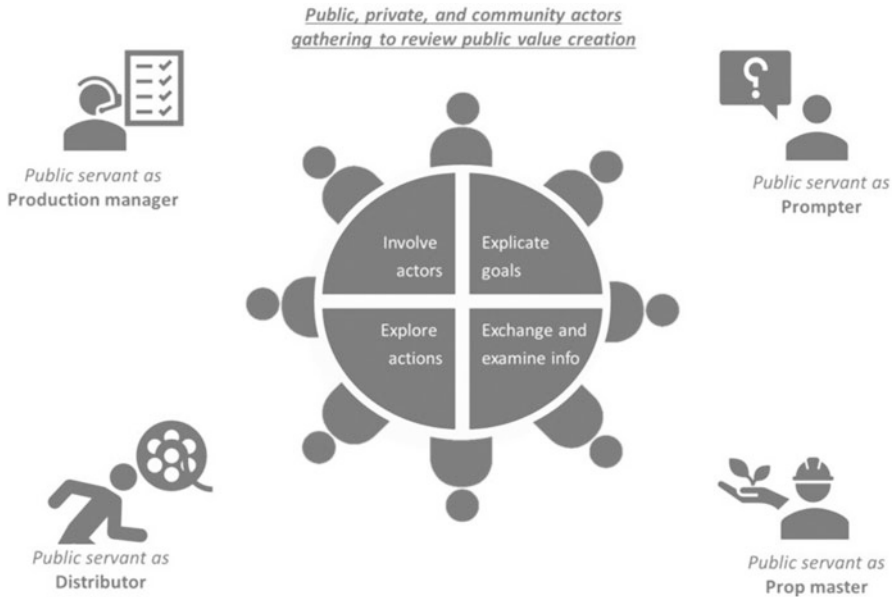
Public servants can play a key role in developing and facilitating such a new style of public value reviews. They can help bring together the relevant actors to discuss the value achieved and missed (Ansell and Gash 2012), just as they can help to translate often vague goals and advances to concrete ambitions and achievements (Bryson et al. 2014). Public servants can collect and collate the relevant information about the performance (Behn 2014) and help to formulate and distribute the appropriate next steps after a review (Sørensen and Torfing 2009). However, public servants must be careful to stay within their mandate and continuously seek political support. Otherwise there is the danger they “supplant politicians, [...] become directly engaged in the political process and become the new Platonic guardians and arbiters of the public interest” (Rhodes and Wanna 2007: 406).

This chapter first outlines what public value reviews would entail, made concrete by focusing on public value reviews using actual summits bringing all public, private, and community actors together to jointly assess the public value created. The chapter then details the role of public servants in organizing and supporting such reviews. Public servants play a key part by (1) managing the production through getting the right people together, (2) helping to explicate goals, (3) providing useful data props to inform the discussion, and (4) distribute the insights of the review to a wide audience. Throughout, public servants must also be careful to not overstep their mandate. Before they know it, they could become (1) the puppeteers pulling the strings behind the scenes, (2) the star performers claiming center-stage, (3) the manipulators providing smoke screens around the data, and/or (4) the censoring boards restricting the spread of information. Figure 1 presents an overview of the four stages of a public value review and the roles public servants could play which will be discussed in detail in this chapter.

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## 2 Conceptualizing Public Value Reviews

The problem of reviewing public value creation is part of the wider puzzle of assessing public performance in an age of complex societal challenges, cross-sector collaborations, and multiple demands on government (Moynihan et al. 2011). Recent scholarly contributions have helped to specify the various substantive dimensions and indicators of public value which should be reviewed. For example, Moore (2013) argues that public value can be recognized by weighing the societal costs versus benefits, Page et al. (2015) argue that the public value of collaborations can be mapped by assessing democratic accountability, procedural legitimacy, and



**Fig. 1** Four roles of public servants in facilitating public value reviews

substantive outcomes, while Meynhardt (2009) explores how public value can be concretized by looking at the fulfillment of basic human needs.

However, assessing public value relies not only on formulating the appropriate performance *measures*, but also on employing appropriate performance *routines* (Douglas and Ansell 2019). Effective performance reviews rely not only on having the right diagnostic tools to measure progress but also on the availability of interactive dialogue spaces to allow actors to jointly explore what the data means (Simons 1994; Moynihan 2005). Especially the assessment of something as nebulous as public value requires interactive reviews to enable actors to jointly define what they consider public value and determine what value has been created.

Interactive performance reviews can be organized in various forms. Bryson and Crosby (1993) make a distinction between “forums” (for an exchange of ideas), “arenas” (for the struggle over decisions), and “courts” (for judging actions and outcomes). Moynihan (2008) promotes the use of “learning forums” to bring various stakeholders inside an organization together and make sense of the performance data. Douglas and Ansell (2019: 6) describe a particular manifestation of interactive performance reviews: “collaborative performance summits” which bring “together the various actors involved in a collaborative initiative to jointly (a) explicate their performance goals, (b) exchange performance information, (c) examine performance information, and (d) explore actions for potential performance improvement.” Such summits have been organized at different levels of government to establish the impact of a particular initiative (e.g., the International AIDS Conferences on the global level, US Presidential Anti-Drugs Summits on the national level, or the Northern England “Powerhouse” economic development summits on the local level).

In theory, these summits provide an opportunity for effective and democratic public value reviews, or what Moore (1995: 163–164) calls “high-quality decisions” with “a large measure of both process and substantive virtues.” The politicians, public managers, community advocates, citizens, and private sector partners participating in a summit are a concrete manifestation of the “authorizing environment.” If the summit manages to give voice to all the actors present, while at the same time remain faithful to the wider democratic structures, summits could provide process legitimacy to the review. Summits could also add to the substantive quality and impact of the review if the collective insight of all the present actors is leveraged to make sense of performance data and spur performance improvement (Moynihan and Kroll 2016).

In practice, using interactive instruments such as summits to review public value reviews is hard to get right and can end up being both ineffective and undemocratic. Summits often have little impact at all, as energies dissipate after the meeting, or are counterproductive as tensions flare when all actors gather in a room (Douglas and Ansell 2019). Summits may produce value assessment incomprehensible to non-participants, as “what one group of decision makers concludes is a reasonable interpretation [of the performance information] and an appropriate response may be completely at odds with another group’s assessment” Moynihan (2006: 151–168). Moreover, these summits can become parallel policy-making circuits not supervised by elected politicians, generating undemocratic decisions (Sørensen and Torfing 2009). Getting these reviews right takes good preparation, good information, good process design (Behn 2014), and above all, good public servants.

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### 3 The Roles of Public Servants in Public Value Reviews

Public servants can play a key role in ensuring public value reviews are effective. At first sight, Public Value Management may seem to give public servants free reign in creating and reviewing public value, as they are called by Moore to act as public entrepreneurs with a “restless, value-seeking imagination” (Benington and Moore 2011: 3). From the related field of collaborative governance, Sørensen and Torfing (2009: 235) also observe that “public managers at different levels of government have a special responsibility for unleashing the potentials of governance networks. As knowledgeable and resourceful actors, they have a capacity for strategic leadership.” Public servants can help to make sure public value reviews have the appropriate resources, data, and insights to properly assess the value created.

Public servants also have a key role in ensuring public value reviews are democratic. Public Value Management has been criticized for inventing “roles for public servants for which they are not appointed” and naïvely assuming that public, private, or community actors “are motivated only to assist and please citizens, to create public value and improve the public good” (Rhodes and Wanna 2007: 406–409). However, Moore is at pains to stress that value-seekers must actively seek support in the authorizing environment and good decisions must stay within the set democratic frameworks. Sørensen and Torfing (2009: 244) also emphasize that collaboration requires extra democratic checks, making sure collaborations are monitored by elected politicians, private and community actors are monitored by the constituents they claim



to represent, the decision-making process is open to scrutiny, and common democratic rules for inclusion, procedural fairness, and respect are respected.

When staging a public review, public servants have a part in advancing these democratic principles, just as they have a key part in making sure the review is effective. Some of these roles are political in nature, involving choices about the balance between interests, the phrasing of goals, or the selection of information. There is a danger in public servants become “puppeteers” secretly pulling the strings behind the scenes or stealing the limelight from citizens and politicians. The facilitation of public value reviews by public servants must be done while continuously seeking consent from the appropriate formal actors and support from the other partners, requiring the utmost political astuteness of public servants (Hartley et al. 2015).

## 4 Public Value Reviews and Public Servant Roles

The roles of public servants in public value reviews are examined in detail by walking through the four phases of staging a public value review in the shape of a summit (involving actors, explicating goals, exchanging and examining information, exploring actions). For each phase, there is a role public servants can embrace and a role public servants must actively seek to avoid.

### 4.1 Involving Actors

Involving actors	
Role to embrace	Role to avoid
 <p><b>Production manager</b></p> <p>Concretize the vision of the political principal for the review, suggesting participants to the principal, getting the right actors together at the right time</p>	 <p><b>Puppeteer</b></p> <p>Control from behind the scenes who is allowed to be involved and who says what</p>

The first step in a public value review is to determine which actors should participate. This selection of actors is more formalized and predefined in traditional bureaucratic settings, as the law will determine who is in charge and who implements, but requires more active demarcation in public value collaborations where a wide range of public, private, and community actors can be involved (Douglas and Ansell 2019). This general ambiguity about roles is concretely manifested when convening a summit physically bringing the key actors together: Who will be invited to partake in the public value review and attend the summit?



There are two rival selection principles for involving actors: the invitation can aim for representative diversity (where all the different partners in any way involved in the

public value creation are invited) or the more selective principle of discursive diversity (where the aim is to invite a cross-section of the different perspective on the value creation, inviting policy makers and end-users, actors focused on costs and actors focused on impact, etc.) (Fiskin 1991). A pragmatic midpoint between these extremes could be that the “whole system” should be in the room. Everyone who can potentially contribute to the value creation should be invited. To make sure they can all share their perspective, but also to ensure the group cannot delegate the blame for failure to some unknown party (Zuurmond 2016).

Another consideration when involving the various partners is the power dynamic between the actors. For example, a local government may invite all the different players involved in sports recreation for an “open conversation” but cannot ignore the fact the local government is also the chief subsidy provider (Van de Noort et al. 2017). Such power asymmetries potentially hinder learning and mutual accountability (Ansell and Gash 2008). Power inequalities cannot be eradicated, but can be made visible and potentially temporally suspended (Quick and Sandfort 2014) through practical interventions such as adding an outsider chair for the meeting or inviting extra people to give voice to underrepresented factions.

Public servants have a key role in the selecting and positioning the participating actors, but must make sure to ensure their political principal makes the final calls. Public servants will often be the ones who know which actors have been involved in the public value creation process, and what the internal dynamics are like. Public servants can therefore play a key role in advising the elected officials what the selection of actors could look like. However, the constitution of these reviews are fundamentally political acts; determining who sits on the table means shaping the nature of the discussion. Public servants should therefore ensure the politicians (or politically appointed officials) make the final selection of participants. Public servants have the role of production managers, supporting politicians in their role as directors; making sure all selected partners get together at the right time, while avoiding the role of puppeteers pulling the strings behind the scenes.

## 4.2 Explicating Goals



Explicating goals	
Role to embrace	Role to avoid
 <p><b>Prompter</b></p> <p>Remind actors of the initial ideas for the goals, circulate first drafts for texts, encourage others to adapt these first suggestions</p>	 <p><b>Star performer</b></p> <p>Take center-stage in defining what is important and what should be discussed, reject alternative interpretations and claim all attention</p>

The next challenge is to formulate the goals or criteria by which to assess the public value. Where New Public Management excels in generating sharp, measurable targets, public value management embraces the complexity and ambiguity of public work. Moreover, these goals may be forever moving and changing, especially complex issues are continuously evolving. Often government is working on “wicked issues” where the lack of consensus on both the problem and solution are core characteristics (Head and Alford 2015). At the same time, the review still requires some standards or ambitions by which to evaluate the results achieved. How can public value creation be assessed?

Recent work on public value assessment has started to outline the different dimensions of “performance” that should be considered. Page et al. (2015) focus on democratic accountability, procedural legitimacy, and substantive outcomes, Van der Torre, Douglas, and ‘t Hart (2019) make a distinction between measuring “material,” “immaterial,” and “procedural” values when assessing public value. Meynhardt and Bartholomes (2011) focuses on the role of public value in satisfying basic human needs.

Public servants have a key role in concretizing these various perspectives on the goals, often servings as prompters providing the first attempt at translating vague value ambitions specific terms or criteria. They have the time and expertise to analyze the policy domain. They can provide a bridge between the world of policy makers (eager to talk about goals and principles) and citizens (eager to discuss their day-to-day experiences) (Innes 1992). Public servants will find themselves in the role of prompters, providing a first suggestions for what could be said. Yet they are not the star performers, who think they channel the public will and determine what is valuable (Rhodes and Wanna 2007). Public servants can and should provide the first suggestions for the goals where necessary, but must expect and encourage changes to these first drafts by politicians and other actors on the table.

### 4.3 Exchanging and Examining Information

Exchanging and examining information	
Role to embrace	Role to avoid
 <p><b>Prop master</b></p> <p>Collect, build, and offer helpful objects, which can aid the different actors in understanding and discussing the value created</p>	 <p><b>Special effects supervisor</b></p> <p>Use smoke and mirrors to inflate public achievements, hide shortcomings, and cover up unknowns</p>

Having established by which criteria to evaluate the created public value, the next challenge is to exchange and examine the relevant information. This information will consist of a mix of “objective” data and statistics, “subjective” experiences of the various actors involved, and “expert” opinions from researchers relevant to the challenge at hand (Moynihan 2005). These different types of information can all contribute, but the





various participants may not consider all information equally useful. For example, street-level civil servants often value different sources of information than their managers (Jos and Watson 2019). What information should be brought to the review?

As the societal challenge at hand is often complex, the information will be complex if not ambiguous as well. For example, a flood of different types of information are available about childhood obesity – from numbers measuring weight to interviews document self-reported well-being. All these sets of information telling slightly different stories about what is important and what is achieved by common action. The temptation may be to oversimplify the problem by selectively ignoring information (Weick et al. 2008) or to succumb to analysis-paralysis and get nothing done (De Jong et al. 2017). An effective preparation of the review can help to combine the different strands of information and manage the complexity (Behn 2014).

Public servants can help to collect and collate the required data, using different format for presenting the data, making useful “data props” for the discussion among participants during the review. For example, Van de Noort et al. (2017) describe how at of a public value review of the regulation of a prostitution zone in a Dutch city, the public servants helped the discussion by offering different types of data. They presented visual data about visitors, background of sex workers, and crime rates in the neighborhood through three simple slides. They also posted quotes of the sex workers – who dare to participate in a semipublic meeting – on the wall of the room where the review took place, making their voices visible.

Public servants can facilitate the exchange and examination of information by collecting useful information beforehand and by providing useful data props during the discussion. However, they must stay clear of adding their own special effects to the information, making the problem or the progress look different on paper than it is in reality. This would be both unethical and unnecessary. The information about such complex matters as value creation is not supposed to dazzle the participants into agreement, but should actually inspire more discussion and constructive disagreement (Spekle and Verbeeten 2014). The public servants therefore have to strike a fine balance between presenting information in comprehensible formats and oversimplifying complex realities.

### 4.4 Exploring Future Actions

Exploring future actions	
Role to embrace	Role to avoid
 <p><b>Distributor</b></p> <p>Share the findings with different audiences, work with officials to get insights to the appropriate political arena</p>	 <p><b>Censor board</b></p> <p>Censor inconvenient parts of the insights from the review, block attempts to share the information with other audiences</p>

Having examined the information about the value created, the participants in the public value review can explore what actions they want to take going forward. These actions may vary from making specific operational changes in how actors work together to proposals for a sweeping overhaul of the system. The challenge is to make these reviews effective by swiftly acting upon identified opportunities for improvement, while at the same time ensuring there are no decisions made without getting the sanction of the appropriate political actors (Sørensen and Torfing 2009).

The problem is that it often is not clear which are “the appropriate political actors” to which the findings from the public value review should be forwarded. The complexity of collaborative relationships makes it unclear who exactly has a democratic mandate to make decisions over complex policy domains (Klijn and Skelcher 2007). For example, if the actors involved in reviewing childhood obesity initiatives concluded that schools should ban soda drinks, it may not be immediately clear whether and which government – or even the schools themselves – are mandated to implement such a rule (Douglas and Ansell 2019).

The public servant has a key role in making sure the insights of the room find their way to the appropriate audiences. They must make sure the findings are recorded in a suitable format – be it a verbatim report, summary statement, or a more creative formats such as a video report – and then they must distribute these findings to the appropriate partners and communities. When sanctioned by their political chiefs, public servants could also make sure the outcomes, suggestions, or changes produced in the review are presented to the relevant political arena’s and legislatures.

The challenge is to package the insights attractively so that the information is actually used by the target audience (Moynihan and Kroll 2016), without censoring politically inconvenient remarks, papering over differences in opinions between actors, or obscuring gaps in knowledge. The public servants must also push back against the tendency to spread the insights of a review on a need-to-know-basis, as a broad range of actors contributed to the review and could be essential to more value creation, the outcomes should be distributed as widely as possible. The job of the public servant is not to censor what should be shared and with whom, but to spread get the information in front of many different audiences.

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## 5 Conclusion

The rise of Public Value Management has broadened the scope ambitions and actors involved in government. This shift requires new routines for reviewing public initiatives, involving more actors and information, yet these new routines must be effective and democratic.

Staging public value reviews through organizing a summit – bringing together the different actors to explicate their public value goals, exchange and examine information, and explore future actions – can provide a new routine for reviewing public value, but relies on public servants playing their part.

Public servants have a key role in summits as production managers, getting the right actors together; prompters, offering a first articulations of the value desired; prop masters, providing useful data and information to review; and distributors, spreading the findings of the reviews to relevant audiences.

At the same time, public servants must actively avoid the roles of puppeteers, manipulating the participants of the summit from behind the scenes; star performers, claiming a large role in the deliberations; special effects wizards, obfuscating information; or censors, restricting distribution of the insights from the summits.

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## 6 Cross-References

- ▶ [Digital Regulation: A New Frontier for Public Service Delivery, Surveillance, and Compliance](#)
- ▶ [Implementation Failures as Learning Pathologies](#)
- ▶ [Navigating Complexity in Policy Implementation](#)
- ▶ [Public Sector Values in a Privatizing State](#)
- ▶ [Public Value Governance: A Framework](#)
- ▶ [Reshaping the Hybrid Role of Public Servants: Identifying the Opportunity Space for Co-production and the Enabling Skills Required by Professional Co-producers](#)

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