

Why Professional Government Doesn't Stand a Chance

*We say we want professional management in the public sector,
but it's in the interest of neither politicians nor public employees.*

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<https://www.governing.com/gov-institute/voices/col-government-professional-management-deficit.html>

(Underlined emphasis added)

In 1981, President Ronald Reagan famously fired 11,000 air traffic controllers who went on strike. Looking back on it, one has to credit those controllers for having the courage to go on strike in the face of pay and working conditions they regarded as unacceptable.

In contrast, the police in New York City, who are unhappy that Mayor Bill de Blasio has not paid them the deference they demand, have been on strike while at work! That is, they have been reporting for duty, so as to get paid, but by making few arrests have been refusing to engage in their duties. The police characterized their exercise in insubordination as an act of protest against the mayor. In fact, of course, it was an act of defiance against the people of New York City, who tax themselves to pay their police force for its services.

What is striking (no pun intended) about the New York City situation is the nature of the battle, with the mayor and the police commissioner on one side and the police on the other. Surely this can't be right. The police, after all, were at work, where supervisors and managers ought to be found. Why is it that we have only the mayor and the commissioner on the side of a day's work for a day's pay? Is there no management in the police department with the responsibility and the authority to obtain work?

The answer is, of course, that there is management, but it is dispiritingly weak. It may even be participating in the debacle. It is, after all, a public-sector mantra that management must be weak. (In theory, weak management allows elected officials to be strong, but in practice no such result is obtained.)

Consider the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. The legislatures of the two states, hardly known as champions of professionalism in government, recently astounded one and all by passing comprehensive reform legislation that would have installed professional management in lieu of political patronage at the bi-state agency. This unexpected and unwelcome intrusion into their political prerogatives served to unite Govs. Andrew Cuomo and Chris Christie, with the announcement that they would veto the legislation amounting to a defense of patronage and a stance against professionalization. The Cuomo-Christie alliance is altogether reminiscent of the political resistance in the 19th century, across party lines, to civil-service government when those reforms cut into political patronage.

Or consider the U.S. Postal Service, which has professional management in name but not in fact. Between Congress on the one hand and labor on the other, Postmaster General Patrick R. Donahue is all but powerless to manage the institution he supposedly heads. The Postal Service's professional managers know exactly what to do to render the agency economically viable. But those measures are not politically viable. So the Postal Service's top management must wait and hope that, one day, that which is required might be politically permissible.

We often pay lip service to professional and managerial values in the public sector, but we rarely permit those values to be applied. At one end of the spectrum, the politicians in charge do not regard managerial values as consistent with their political interests. At the other end, the labor unions that represent millions of government employees regard professional management as their mortal enemy.

So it is that we portray government's management deficit as a political problem. But in truth it is a structural, institutional problem. Neither the politicians in charge of government nor the employees who would be subject to it have any interest in promoting professional management. As long as this remains the case, and it looks like it may remain the case in perpetuity, institutions of government will continue to operate without professional management. The public pays a huge price for this, but as yet neither politicians nor labor have been called upon to pay any price at all.

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