P.A. in the era of competitive sourcing: Quality, qualitatively

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In 2004, I got curious about the Bush Administration’s competitive sourcing initiative. I saw an institution struggling to inject the matter of worth and quality into a conversation on costs and quantitative results.

Among President George W. Bush’s management initiatives, competitive sourcing was the most complex, most challenging, and most politicized, admitted Angela Styles, chief of procurement policy at the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), in 2002.

Styles had left OMB when I started my research but behind her the battle raged on how to subject thousands of federal commercial jobs for public-private competition under the rules of Circular A-76 and according to performance criteria set by the OMB Scorecard.

In competitive sourcing, if contractors can perform the job more efficiently than the government team, the work is outsourced and the affected employees are terminated or reassigned within the organization. Early in the Bush Administration the policy preference was for a limited duration of government work, followed by a tender process. In the middle of these concerns, another one voiced the urgency for bureaucracy to adapt to the changing milieu. Robert Knauer, a noted A-76 expert, wrote in Government Executive in 2003 that if the feds wanted to succeed against contractors, they should find the resources and internal skills instead of “relying on Beltway bandits” to prepare the bids on their behalf.

Knauer railed the feds to stop dragging their feet and ensure that the process worked to their advantage, saying, “Get all the training you can, and take the lessons learned over the last two years to heart,” because in the process, “You may win.” Several others anonymously gave anecdotes when organizational capacities and human resource needs emerged as the main challenge to haphazard competitive sourcing.

But, while it is true that only a small portion of service contracting dollars (2 percent in the case of the Defense department) is covered by A-76, according to the General Accountability Office, the voices above allude to the clash between quality and cost, technique and policy, and points of my study. This is because competitive sourcing is not just a debate on cost comparison; it suggests a worth comparison. Quality, not mere quantity. How one measures that which defies traditional measurement?

Quality in the bureaucracy—the extra mile of service commitment and effort beyond the job’s description—is not vanished merchandise; it is there, you know it when you see it, but if no one is looking, how is it known?

This brings me to my second point: now that the spotlight is on the public sector, the time is ripe for students to conduct qualitative research on public administration due to the business transformation that competitive sourcing, for the government. Statistics, such as budgets and positions being converted to contracts say much, but so do voices and dynamics that should not be regarded as anecdotes when organizational capacities and the prospects of a career in government are diminishing.

Public administrators need to be heard more, sooner than later. A sustained discourse between the academy and the community of practice is crucial when the subject matter is changing public administrations as we know it.

While the federal bureaucracy continues to evolve, talking through the process can help ensure that the next reform agenda does not lack continuity or consistency. It engenders a kind of bureaucratic soul-searching that traditional contracting creates often after a severe failure of contract execution (think billions of dollars). In regard to jobs the feds have always performed, in competitive sourcing, matters of institutional capacity and the essential nature of civil service dominated the dialogue in the moment. White House launched the initiative. Loyal civil servants expect loyalty from their employer in return; agencies are not designed to compete for dollars; and the missions they are given do not depend on being one, according to critics.

The government’s business model attempts to fix the bifurcation between traditional and competitive contracting by insisting that their ends ought to be the same—cost-efficiency—and when it comes to performance of jobs that OMB regards as commercial, there really should be no distinction between civil servants and private contractors. Look inward and find something there to distinguish and defend yourself; in other words, because on the outside you all look the same. This topic is complex and this article does not attempt to sort it out; I just wish to say that competitive sourcing is an important clue to public administration’s evolution. The 2006 National Academy of Public Administration’s assessment of A-76 jobs awarded to employee teams shows that agency life after competitive sourcing treads on so many unknowns, legally, financially, culturally.

Even if competitive sourcing wanes at the end of the Bush administration, the competition policy has already set into motion something none of the previous A-76 circulars achieved. A need has been planted in the bureaucracy’s belly. Whether it ends up recreating public administration from the inside or dying in a stillbirth, it is something we need to keep our eyes on.

ASPA member Ernie Joaquin is joining the University of Nevada—Las Vegas, College of Urban Affairs in the fall. E-mail: ejoaquin@niu.edu.

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Promise of the Business Model: Fulfilled/Unfulfilled?

M. Ermita Joaquin

The promise of the business model: fulfilled/unfulfilled? By M. Ermita Joaquin

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