

Making Sense of It All: Using Analytical Tools in Everyday Work

Thinking and acting strategically is central to effective public management. Public Value Theory offers analytic tools to help public managers guide inquiry and shape decisions. A [study](#) by a group of scholars and executive trainers examines how practitioners can take advantage of theory in practice.

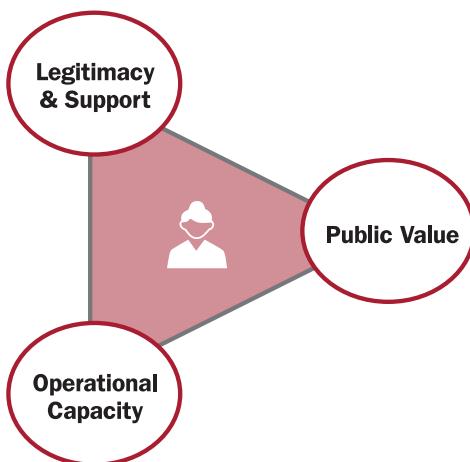
By Jorrit de Jong and Eric Weinberger

In 2016, [Dr. Roberto Claudio, the mayor of Fortaleza, Brazil, was determined to deliver on his election promise: tackling a drug shortage problem in public health clinics](#), where patients often had to wait a long time or travel far to get the medication they needed. However, not everyone in the healthcare system – or even on his own team – saw the problem the same way or felt the same urgency. With high public expectations but scarce financial resources, Mayor Claudio faced a triple strategic challenge: how to realize the goal of delivering medications to patients in a convenient and timely manner; how to reimagine the capacity to deliver with little money; and how to engage lukewarm yet essential stakeholders.

“Public value,” a term coined by Harvard professor Mark Moore, is [defined](#) as “the net ‘good’ that public leaders produce that each of us—and all of us together—enjoy.” Moore has built a robust set of analytic tools on the concept of public value that allow practitioners and scholars alike to make sense of thorny problems and tricky politics. The “strategic triangle,” for example, helps managers assess available resources, support from stakeholders, and pin down the true public value of a given enterprise. Assessing a strategic challenge in this way can help distribute attention, challenge assumptions, identify blind spots, and generate new ideas.

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Figure 1. The Strategic Triangle imagines the public manager as an agent of change seeking to align legitimacy and support on one hand and operational capacity on the other with the creation of public value.



How to use an abstract concept to take concrete action?

While the tools of [public value theory](#) are designed to help managers handle ambiguity and cope with the continuous clash between the interests, perspectives, and values that are at the core of so many public challenges, applying them can be difficult: how to use an abstract

concept to take concrete action? An international group of scholars and educators, who have written about and taught public value in classrooms and board rooms around the world, published a [paper](#) that explores how, exactly, analytic tools can help managers make sense of messy situations. They identified four ways in which analytic tools can be used in everyday work:

① Setting a Level of Ambition

Analytic tools help articulate and clarify goals. What positive change—what value—are you and your organization producing? How do you know you are actually producing value—i.e., improving conditions in the world? In Fortaleza, having won reelection on a campaign promise about medicines, Mayor Claudio wanted bold action rather than a vague, open-ended commitment to “improving access”—and his team came up with a very specific list of 84 essential primary-care medicines that needed to be delivered more effectively, efficiently, and equitably. His public value proposition of accomplishing concrete improvements in residents’ quality of life through innovations in delivery of medicines was compelling and galvanized both his team and external stakeholders.

② Exploring the Strategic Space

Analytic tools can help chart a path forward. What forces within or outside the organization reinforce the status quo—or prompt it to change? What room to maneuver exists for both the organization and the individual manager? The strategic triangle helps managers take a broader view of their “strategic space” or room to operate. In Fortaleza, many people felt improving access to drugs was an impossible task given the system’s complexity and the time and money it would take to change it. The unorthodox idea of installing small pharmacy units in bus terminals was met with skepticism but once it became clear that it was operationally and financially feasible it became hard to resist. Ambiguity, conflict, inertia, and all sorts of other constraints are part and parcel of public management, but opportunities for positive change can and must be found. Systematic analysis of the immediate environment helps to identify them.

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③ Navigating Conflicts and Constraints

Analytic tools help managers understand differences in perspective and interests among stakeholders. Change-makers who experience resistance or indifference to their plans are forced to think about where others are coming from. What do they want and why? What are they concerned about? Is there a way they can see value in the proposed innovations? Public officials will always be buffeted by contradictory demands and preferences, and tensions within the team as well as externally. In Fortaleza, Mayor Claudio's original team had run out of steam in the face of the tedious task of improving access to primary care medications. He decided to bring in new perspectives and specific financial, technical, and managerial expertise. The new team was quickly able to transcend the trade-offs that impeded progress and bring parties together around an innovative solution. The strategic triangle can help users chart perspectives on problems (and solutions) held by stakeholders and the community at large. Here, the tool helps change agents resolve conflicts through inclusive framing, open deliberation, structured negotiation, and careful process management.

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④ Imagining Your Personal Role

Analytic tools help change agents focus their attention and figure out their role. At any given time, in any particular situation, the challenge for value-seeking public entrepreneurs is to determine how and where to be most effective and where to direct one's attention: Should you do more research and work on crafting a more compelling value proposition? Should you engage in aligning stakeholder expectations; should you work on reinventing the operational capacity to deliver? In Fortaleza, Mayor Claudio started using the strategic triangle in 2018 to change the way he ran planning meetings with his staff. Rather than rattle off a list of tasks and instructions or try to control the process, he presented the triangle and articulated his vision of timely delivery of essential medicines to every patient who needed them. Mayor Claudio then asked his team where and how they felt they should focus the administration's efforts to achieve that value proposition. This created space for his team to imagine new ways to solve the puzzle and conceive new roles they could play, individually and as a team.

Assessing Self and Situation

In each of these four dimensions, there is a need for balance. Elected officials and public managers may get carried away, feel unconstrained, or inflate their own importance, with the risk of imposing their vision onto others and putting their interests before the public's. On the other end of the spectrum, managers may retreat to conventional or conservative administrator behavior, failing to fully explore the potential to create public value. Analytic tools can help get the balance right.



Table 1. Understanding the dimensions of a public management challenge through public value tools

DIMENSIONS OF CHALLENGE	RESTRAINED	BALANCED	UNRESTRAINED
Value ambition	Focus on minimizing costs and hitting targets	Focus on adding value to society	Focus on fulfilling own ambition for society
Strategic space	Focus on managing operations and serving politicians	Focus on alignment between public value, legitimacy and support, and operational capacity	Connect everything with everything, overextending the strategic space
Conflicts and constraints	Take constraints as a force of nature and aim to depoliticize or ignore value conflicts	Aim to assess and discuss constraints and facilitate the resolution of value conflicts through deliberation and structured negotiation	Ignore constraints and aim to prevail in conflicts at all costs
Personal role	Accepts alienation from work and does not insert oneself into the equation	Strikes a balance between loyalty to the current political or social equilibrium and commitment to changing the situation by individual exercising leadership	Regards the public domain as personal exploration space and adopts a frontier mentality

(Table 1 appears in the underlying study by Jorrit de Jong, Scott Douglas, Mariafrancesca Sicilia, Zoe Radnor, Mirko Noordegraaf and Peter Debus, in *Public Management Review* 19:5, 605-620)

Using analytic tools of public value theory—like the strategic triangle—can help practitioners reconnect with purpose and rethink how they operate. The tools do not prescribe definite answers or concrete solutions. Instead they help raise the right questions, identify blind spots, focus attention, and structure conversations. Using the tools takes practice and people often find external facilitation helpful. At the same time, the example of Mayor Claudio, and many others like him, shows that the key factors to effective use of analytic tools include curiosity, openness to reflection, and a deep commitment to creating public value one way or another.

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Links to Related Material

This practitioner summary is based on a paper, [Instruments of Value: Using the analytic tools of public value theory in teaching and practice \(2017\)](#), by Jorrit de Jong, Scott Douglas, Mariafrancesca Sicilia, Zoe Radnor, Mirko Noordegraaf and Peter Debus, in *Public Management Review* 19:5, 605-620. (A related article on strengthening strategic capacity can be found [here](#).)

The Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative website offers a complete [Public Value Toolkit, including brief explainer videos on public value and the strategic triangle](#). The [Fortaleza case study](#) can also be found on the site, and includes [educator](#) and [practitioner](#) guides.

