How middle managers and executives identify policy or management problems

Dorothy Olshfski
Graduate Department of Public Administration
Rutgers University – Newark

Robert Cunningham
Department of Political Science
University of Tennessee
Knoxville, TN

The executive branch of the U.S. state government does more than administer the laws of the state; the executive branch creates policy that impacts people's lives. Making policy and implementing policy are the everyday tasks of cabinet members and middle managers in state government. Using a simple decision model to frame managers' stories about situations they faced, this paper describes, analyzes, and explains how middle managers and cabinet members identify policy and managerial problems to be addressed by government managers. Specifically, we ask how policy and managerial problems are identified by middle managers and executives.

Problem-identification / Agenda Setting

The decision-making process commences with problem-identification (also called "agenda setting" [Baumgartner and Jones 1993, Kingdon 1984, Lester and Stewart 2000, Rochefort and Cobb 1994]). We name the things to which we will attend, and frame the context in which we will attend to them (Schon 1983). An unlimited number of problems and opportunities are floating in the environment waiting to be addressed. Once a problem is selected and defined, a limited range of possible solutions attaches to it. The subjectivity of managerial problem identification suggests that the concept of a "Type III error"--solving the wrong problem (Raiffa 1968)--needs refining.¹ In technical work there is a wrong

¹ Problems facing managers and executives can be divided into technical and managerial categories. Technical problems have a consensually agreed condition and an identifiable cause and effect. A technical problem involves something that was working, then stopped working. The problem would be solved by fixing it. There is no discussion of strategies for what needs to be done. The fixer accepts the original solution or plan and focuses on eliminating the problem. Technical problems have right and wrong solutions. Neither executives nor middle managers talked about technical problems. Managerial problems are called "wicked" (Mason and Mitroff 1981, Gortner 1991), "second
problem. Managerial work is different from technical work. The notion of the "wrong problem" in managerial work is the perspective of someone using a different problem definition ("My interpretation of the political environment doesn't support that definition of the problem"), or personally disagreeing ("I would offer an alternative definition of the problem"). Russo and Schoemaker (1989) describe “frame blindness” as the inability to visualize multiple conceptions of the same situation.

The problem identification process has received more attention in policy studies than in administrative studies. By defining an issue in a particular way, policy activists attempt to steer an issue into an arena sympathetic to their interests. By putting their interpretation on a situation, the politician, party, or interest group seeks by framing the issue in a particular way to gain favorable public opinion toward their interpretation. Schattschneider (1960) argued that the ability to define the arena created an opportunity to control the outcome. By controlling problem identification activists seek to determine the arena, thereby increasing the probability of an outcome to their liking. Rochefort and Cobb (1994) offer a collection of readings demonstrating the usefulness of this approach to understanding policy-making in air transportation, ground traffic congestion, drugs, AIDS, and agriculture.

A “problem” or “opportunity” has life only if it is so identified by someone with sufficient influence to direct attention toward that situation. Defining a problem sets boundaries to our attention and imposes coherence on a situation, which allows us to say what is wrong and how this situation should be changed. Managerial problems are in the eye of the beholder, they are subjectively defined. By focusing the attention of participants on a particular “problem,” the manager may eliminate other "problems" from rising onto the action agenda. Problem identification is the first step in our decision process model.

Research Design

Both authors were trained in the quantitative tradition, and quantitative processes dominated the research design phase. Choosing managers to be interviewed emphasized method over subjective judgment. Based on their management competence, state government middle managers were selected by a committee of commissioners and peers to attend the Tennessee Government Executive Institute. Each attendee from 1984-1986 was interviewed by at least one of the authors, and their stories constitute our middle manager data set. These outstanding middle managers selected the ten best commissioners of the Alexander administrations. From a list of all commissioners who served between order” (Argyris et al 1985 ), or “third order” (Golembiewski 1979) because they lack agreed definitions and solutions.  

2 Viewing a problem in this way complicates the common method of defining organizational or managerial goals as a discrepancy between a desired state and the present situation (Schon 1983). One focuses top-down by using vision and goals, or bottom-up by beginning with agendas and problems.
January 1979 and June 1985, each member of the Tennessee Government Executive Institute class of 1985 marked by secret ballot the ten commissioners each middle manager thought most outstanding. The ten commissioners with the highest number of votes were interviewed. No commissioner refused to be interviewed; all ten commissioners were cooperative and forthcoming in their responses, and generous with their time.

A second quantitative element in the research design involves the decision model. Our decision process model, which resembles many other decision models, was set out in advance, and was used to structure the interviews with both middle managers and executives, and served as a check-list for probes. The data consisted of stories that the managers and executives related in response to a question that asked them to tell us a story about a program or policy that they were involved in and that they fell good about. Thus, the managers and executives defined successful activity, not the researchers. Managers were queried during the course of the interview to include information describing their activities according to the categories of the model. This is a quantitative approach: frame the model and then collect information from all interviewees in order to compare responses for these categories (May 1994). This is the decision process model:

**identify problem → examine alternatives → decide → implement → evaluate**

The selection of commissioners and the interview schedule are compatible with a quantitative design. However, the interview and data analysis components of our research are qualitative, generally falling within the ethnographic tradition. Ethnography seeks to understand whole systems by studying the patterns of social interaction in a particular setting, attempting to uncover why people do what they do (Jones et al 1988); and learning from people rather than studying them (Argyris et al 1985, Ch.6). Research information comes from the respondent’s experience (Schein 1987). In the field the ethnographer uses multiple techniques to learn how managers make sense of their situations (Boghdan and Taylor 1975). Meaning is socially constructed, and changes over time (Morse 1994). The good researcher is led, but always in control (Banister et al 1994). The common behaviors / attitudes (the culture) of some collective is central (Boyle 1994).

For the middle manager group our research also represents “action science”—a process in which clients and researchers learn from each other (Argyris et al 1985, Gumnesson 1991, Ch.4). The middle managers taught us about state government; we, and other presenters at the executive development sessions, discussed with middle managers suggestions for improving the management of their organizations. During the interview though we followed the same procedures as with the executives; all elements of the model were to be covered by the stories told by the middle managers.

The decision process model was effective for organizing middle managers stories, but did not flow smoothly for executives. Executive stories did not follow the stages of the decision model, even after probes. Some problems were defined, and then handed to a subordinate to solve; other situations, once defined by the commissioner, required no further managerial decisions for the
solution and implementation stages. For the quantitative researcher, these data are missing, allowing the corrupting influence of bias to enter. The qualitative researcher, on the other hand, seeks to understand the decision processes underlying each situation and to develop alternative decision models reflective of these situations. We did not abandon the model which served as the framework for our discussions with the executives, rather we expanded the scope of the inquiry in order to capture more stories and more examples of executive thinking as they moved through their convoluted decision processes.

**Stories as Data**

Ethnographers rely on information derived from inside (emic) data and outside (etic) data to describe and explain. Our principal evidence is emic data, the personal stories told by middle managers and executives recounting events in which they participated. Interviews with Alexander staff people, close observers of the Tennessee political scene, newspaper and journal accounts, two books written by Alexander, and conversations with a number of people whose paths crossed events associated with the Alexander administration constitute etic data used in this research.

Stories construct an institutional history for the organization (Boje 1991), and capture life by bridging theory and practice in a way facts cannot (Czarniawska 1999). Stories diagnose the organizational culture (McConkie and Boss 1994), and allow the deep structure to become visible (Dyer and Wilkins 1991), helping the listener to understand the theories under which the teller is operating (Hummel 1991), or helping managers to do their jobs better (Herzog and Claunch 1997). Story images communicate more accurately and effectively than numbers or didactic sentences. "Where practical choice and action are concerned, stories are better guides than rules or maxims.... stories are the natural mediators between the specific and the general" (Robinson and Hawpe, in Vitz 1990). Hummel (1991) cites Heidegger's statement that an approach must be adequate to the object. Understanding a manager's style and orientation to the job cannot be gained easily from a large, impersonal data set. Stories enlighten both practitioner and theorist.

The stories represent decision processes characteristic of upper and middle managers during the Alexander administration. Schein (1987) points out that upper level managers are often inaccessible to ethnographers. We were fortunate in having access to middle managers who knew and trusted us because we worked with the Tennessee Government Executive Institute management development program. This trust, developed with middle managers over several years, provided an entrée to the Commissioners, who knew of us through their middle managers.

Commissioners who are prepared to tell their stories offer a rich data source. Here, competent cabinet members and competent middle level managers tell stories about decisions in which they were involved. The recounted events reveal the teller and the situation without divulging political secrets or rendering the narrator uncomfortable. A commissioner's story describes the person and the
agency, and connects the commissioner to other participants in the decision. Commissioner stories provide the broad context for middle managers' stories, and substantial information about the management style of Governor Alexander.

Managers told of specific incidents--management situations--that were successful, where they performed well as managers. In their stories, Alexander's cabinet members often mention the Governor, thereby communicating important insights about how Alexander related to his top administrators, as well as about how these cabinet members related to peers and subordinates. Stories told by assistant commissioners and directors include in the narrative superiors, peers, subordinates, and clients, but do not connect to the governor.

Qualitative vs Quantitative Research

Both quantitative research and qualitative research have strengths for the conduct of inquiry. Quantitative research gives priority to method over substance. Truth emerges from the process. Following standard rules of procedure in carrying out research will reduce the likelihood of error, and repeated testing furthers an ongoing search for truth. Content subordinates to method. Qualitative research emphasizes substance over method. Qualitative researchers pursue their subject matter by any method that will shed light on the topic; method subordinates to content.

Quantitative researchers do not object if a scholar pursues content over method, but the findings from qualitative research are considered to be at the "level of discovery," constituting speculation, not science (Falco 1973, 51; Kaplan 1964, 13-14). Speculations must undergo testing according to acceptable, scientific procedures before being admitted to the accepted body of contingent knowledge. Verifiability—stating propositions operationally so that prior studies can be replicated and the findings checked for consistency—is an essential criterion for acceptable quantitative research (Bergmann 1958, 24-28; Kaplan 1964, 38).

Qualitative researchers would respond that all scientific knowledge, whether called "quantitative" or "qualitative," is contingent truth, to be confirmed or adjusted in the light of evidence (Gummesson 1991). A general statement, hypothesis, or theory is never finalized, but transcended by subsequent research. Qualitative researchers employ quantitative findings as evidence, but they do not accord these findings priority status. Numbers can be revised up or down based upon information available to the researcher (Diesing 1971, 171).

Quantitative scholars insist on falsifiable hypotheses tested by carefully documented procedures which are subject to verification by succeeding researchers. Evidence not susceptible to re-test under specific conditions is unreliable (Blalock and Blalock 1968, 12). Qualitative researchers throughout

---

3 Initially, commissioners were also asked to tell a story about a situation which did not work out so well. We obtained a few "failure stories," but some commissioners could not recall failures, other interviews went on for more than an hour on success stories, so we gradually abandoned this probe.
their project reinterpret their information as they gain additional evidence or insight. They would argue that validity emerges from the "creative use of bias" (Diesing 1971, 199). Diesing (1971) counsels the researcher to keep an open mind during data analysis. This advice is based on the assumption that bias cannot be eradicated. If one cannot get rid of bias, use it wisely! Seek disconfirming evidence. Here in this project, the stubbornness of each author ensured that the data were ransacked for countervailing information and alternative themes.

Building Theory from Below

"Grounded theory" (Glaser and Strauss 1967) describes our research. Grounded theory looks to create or test an empirical theory "bottom-up" by linking specific instances to larger ideas. Strauss and Corbin (1990, 21-22) offer three guides for qualitative research studies: 1-let the informants speak for themselves, 2-give an accurate description of the context, and 3-let theory emerge from the specifics. In this presentation we describe the context, quote extensively from the subjects, then link conclusions regarding manager/leader competences closely to the statements of those interviewed.

As we read and re-read the interviews, the information seemed tractable to social construction (Berger and Luckmann 1967). Each of us defines (constructs) reality. Two managers looking at the same situation may "see" different realities. Reality is not only objective, "out there", as the quantitative researcher would assume, but reality is also constructed in the head of each individual. The usefulness of this constructivist assumption is demonstrated by interviews with two commissioners from the Department of Personnel. Commissioner Darrell Akins saw the Department of Personnel as being too rigidly organized, for individual skills and task responsibilities did not mesh. To deal with this situation he shuffled responsibilities to accord with the special skills of his managers, allowing each manager to take on tasks best fitting his/her abilities; in the process disregarding formal job descriptions. Martha Olson, the next Commissioner of Personnel, saw the agency as lacking an understandable structure. She reorganized, making sure that job responsibilities meshed with job descriptions (rather than incumbent skills). What constituted a solution for Darrell Akins was seen by Martha Olson as a problem requiring attention. Karl Weick (1995), following pioneers Berger and Luckmann (1967) and Bateson (1972) in the constructivist tradition, uses the word "sensemaking" to describe the process. Weick describes how managers and organizations participate in creating their own reality. Sensemaking has the paradoxical quality of simultaneously being influenced by reality and constructing one’s own reality.

Quantitative researchers insist that each variable must be unambiguously defined. Open-ended, vague, or multiple definitions are not permitted. However, open-ended, vague, paradoxical situations are a reality that managers face every day. A qualitative design can handle complex and ambiguous situations more effectively than can a quantitative design.
Factors Affecting Problem Identification: Position, Politics and Perspective

Position

The importance of position, one's location in the formal organization, is readily understood and acknowledged by both practitioners and scholars. Hierarchy is widely perceived to govern administrative decision-making, with the Weberian legal-rational administrative system as the presumptive model. Decisions are taken at the top of the organization. Orders trickle down the hierarchy--one tells another, who tells another, until implementation occurs. Having a high position grants discretion to set a broader agenda, thus to define the problems that will constitute the agenda for subordinates. A commissioner, who reports to the governor, sets the agency's agenda with reasonable assurance that the issue will command attention and instigate action within the agency.

Issues enter at various locations in the hierarchy, and each position has its own issue-concerns. Every management level has areas in which authoritative pronouncements can be made. Middle managers have narrower responsibilities and less control over their agendas than do executives. A middle manager must expend effort to import an issue that is not imbedded in one's job description or routine duties. A commissioner has more latitude than a middle manager in selecting, interpreting, and deciding issues. The following story of a promoted middle manager illustrates the importance of position, and how location in the hierarchical structure colors an individual's perception of organizational problems.

I was working as warden and it had come to my attention that the prison hospital needed a particular piece of equipment. We desperately needed this piece of equipment. I wrote an eight-page memo detailing all the reasons why we had to have this thing. I couldn't see how they could turn us down at the central office; this was critical to the operations of the medical facility. Well, I wrote the memo on a Thursday, and that Friday I got a promotion and I was moved to the central office. I moved on Tuesday. On Wednesday, I received my own memo. I had to turn myself down.

Participatory management and consultative decision-making have become pervasive in the management literature, but such counter-hierarchical notions appear to have shallow roots in management practice. Although a few middle managers told stories of participatory strategies at the middle levels of the hierarchy, the middle manager's and executive's organizational positions influence significantly the issues they face and the problems they identify. Position is an important factor in shaping a manager's agenda.
Politics

Politics is the visible clash of preferences--politicians seeking favorable publicity for re-election plans or benefits for friends and supporters, organized interests pursuing their goals, and amorphous public opinion stating value preferences. Politics compels government employees to respond to articulated demands coming from outside the unit or agency. In state government, as in all governments, there is no fixed goal toward which the government is heading; consequently, there are no clearly identifiable, easily agreed upon, policy or managerial problems to be solved. The emerging issues result from events in the environment and the political preferences of the significant decision makers and stakeholders. The bargaining-compromise-accommodation process of politics shapes the issues that make up the public agenda. Defining the problem is a political process (Dunn 1981; Stone 1988; Jones 1994). When a significant stakeholder brings an issue touching on the agency's content area into the public arena, a manager's political antennae are fully extended, and problem identification becomes politicized.

Getting on the manager's agenda via politics depends on the strength of the issue's supporters, not the righteousness of the cause. Public agencies are rife with issues that never make it onto the agenda for action. In the political context, concerns languish unless the issue champion is able to rally sufficient support to elevate the issue to the status of "problem that merits attention." Politics can energize any issue and force it to the top of the manager's agenda. Executives deal with partisan politics as a component of the problem identification process.

Middle managers were largely insulated from partisan political issues. Interest groups with competing aims were the political actors confronted by middle managers. Interest group conflicts may pit two sections of an agency against each other (patient advocates versus nursing home owners in the Department of Health), or two departments against each other (Department of Health versus Department of Agriculture in carrying out food inspections). Politics intrudes in the middle managers' problem identification process differently than it does for the executives.

Perspective

Perspective, determined by one's personality, background, and experience, is the invisible choice that individuals make about what matters and what does not, what should be paid attention to and what can be ignored. Unlike politics, which is visible and obvious, perspective involves the individual's personal biases that, consciously or unconsciously, drive the selection of an issue for attention. Personal preferences, educational background and training, and prior work experiences influence the way a manager or an executive looks at a situation. An engineer tends to see problems or solutions in terms of something to be built, while a lawyer will be sensitive to the legal process. Department of Transportation Commissioner Farris, whose primary career
experience was in retailing, chose inventory as a managerial issue; whereas Commissioner Sansom, who headed the same department but came from an engineering background, emphasized highway construction. Perspective influences what a manager finds in a situation, the priorities toward which one chooses to direct attention.

To summarize, an issue gains the attention of the manager for one of three reasons:
1-because the issue falls within the responsibility of the manager’s position,
2-because politics has forced the issue onto the manager’s agenda, or
3-because the manager has a personal desire to address the situation.

“Position” and “politics” impose issues on the manager. “Perspective” describes those situations in which the manager’s personal agenda dominates.

The administrative problem identification process inside an agency does not receive extensive public or research attention, but problem identification is a daily activity for the public manager. The range of managerial problems visible to a manager or executive is a function of the individual’s position in the hierarchy, one’s perspective, and the political environment surrounding the manager or executive. We will first present the problem identification activities of middle managers, then turn to executives.

**Middle Managers**

The manager’s agenda is malleable, subject to political actors in the environment, and influenced by the individual’s personal motivation and ability to act. *Position, politics, and perspective* are important factors in accounting for which issues contend for priority on the manager’s agenda, which issues the manager selects to address, and how the manager defines those issues. The stories middle managers tell illustrate what they believe to be significant challenges, and cover a wide range of accomplishment. Although middle manager activities range broadly, their actions do not have the depth or the far-reaching impact of the actions taken by commissioners. Middle managers tell stories of coordination, reorganization, technical innovation, conflict resolution, and implementation. Middle managers do not work directly for the governor, and they cannot change the direction of their departments. Middle managers have less latitude than do executives, both in terms of their ability to choose problems to work on and the solution options open to them. Issues usually arise elsewhere and travel to the middle manager's desk. Subordinates push problems up the chain of command; superiors send issues down to the middle manager for action; and stakeholders come to visit the manager with their wishes and concerns.

**Position: Problems Sent Through Channels**

Challenges can come to the middle manager's desk from below, from above, and or from outside the agency. Problems that originate outside and land on the manager’s desk through official channels of communication are not easily
ignored. Someone along the bureaucratic chain thinks that the particular issue is a problem that needs attention. Once the problem is put on the action agenda, even if the problem starts out on someone else’s agenda, the middle manager is ill-advised to ignore it. The ball has been put in your court; a failure to act reflects negatively on your competence.

It comes as no surprise that subordinates channel troublesome problems up the line for the middle manager to handle. Nor is it surprising that the superior refers problems down to the middle manager’s desk. The middle manager faces downward toward subordinates, upward toward the executive, as well as horizontally to peers in other agencies who have problems they would like to get rid of. One manager was sent a problem from her subordinates regarding clarification and equalization of the procedures to admit clients to state mental health facilities. After working with peers in related organizations, this mental health middle manager felt that the problem of clarifying and equalizing the procedures for admitting clients had been festering too long. It had been a source of irritation to managers in related organizations. Peers encouraged her to tackle the issues.

*Originally the problem came out of the planning process…(but) when the community could get someone in for evaluation easier than for treatment, the system began to boil over. I started writing a series of memos saying…we need to be able to identify services for these individuals…. Along about that time my counterpart in community services started identifying more gaps in the mental health centers.*

This manager received the communication from peers outside the agency, which resonated with her personal feelings, so she took action.

Two middle managers received an assignment from the Commissioner of Safety.

*When they first passed photo drivers’ licenses, there was a big rush to get the program put together… They were having a lot of complaints from driver’s license people…The governor’s office received more complaints from that area than any other area in state government. Of course, Commissioner Roberts was alarmed about that, and he decided that we needed to do something. He assigned Charles and me to go out to see what was wrong and see what we could do about it.*

Their charge required both identifying the problem and solving it. The problem traveled from the governor’s office to the commissioner, to these two middle managers, who were sent on special assignment to work full-time to define this problem, and then solve it.

Another middle manager was encouraged to deal with a problem that was identified by a federal support agency, the National Institute of Corrections (NIC). The federal agency had been called in originally to assist the department in designing a classification system and workload analysis program. After looking over the situation, the federal agency declined to provide that requested service.
Instead, they offered their organizational development expertise to assist the agency in coping with “the spirit of intrigue” that pervaded the working unit.

They [NIC] said, “Tell you what we’ll do. We won’t come in and set up classification for you, and we won’t do a work load analysis system with you. But we will come in and do some organizational development with you. We will help you and your group do it. Because if you don’t do that, it won’t do any good to get you a case management system. Your organization needs this first before anything else can come down.”

The negative climate was identified by outside observers and brought to the manager’s attention. The outside organization convinced him to define organizational climate as a problem. Once the problem was identified, the manager went to great lengths to improve his unit’s decision-making processes.

The Governor, desiring to cut red tape, issued an executive order to all agencies to eliminate duplicate services. This spurred the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health to address multiple inspections of food products.

An assistant commissioner in the Department of Agriculture tells the story about identifying this problem, which was set in motion by the governor’s message, and soon attracted into the discussion those businesses that sold food products, as well as middle managers and stakeholders from the state agencies that inspect food products. Stores were concerned about being inspected two or three times a year by the same standard by two different departments.

The governor, getting into the second administration, issued an executive order. It was his intention to eliminate all duplication by state government. So, we realized the duplication and the grocery store industry realized the duplication, and we all started to eliminate all of that.

This issue was identified by the governor's office, traveled to the agencies, then down to an assistant commissioner’s desk, attracting the involvement of interest groups along the way. Problem identification was not contentious; all parties agreed that duplicate inspections should be halted.

All of the above situations landed on a middle manager’s desk by referral from peers, superiors, or subordinates. Position in the hierarchy largely dictated that a problem would land on that particular manager’s desk.

**Perspective**

Some middle managers discussed interpersonal office problems that they personally felt interfered with doing an effective job. These stories described personnel disagreements, interpersonal conflicts, unsupportive and uncooperative group relations, or high levels of mistrust in a work unit.

A negative work environment, identified by the manager alone, without involvement of a superior, is often seen as a problem that needs to be addressed. A middle manager, new to a position, may see the work unit
atmosphere as an impediment to effective performance. A recently appointed agency personnel director described her situation like this:

The managers were receiving absolutely no response from personnel [section within the agency] at all…. It was a wonder they were getting paid. There was a great deal of misinformation, a lot of suspicion between the department managers and the administration.

Having succeeded another manager in the same department who did not choose to identify the work climate or interpersonal conflict as a problem, the manager identified the negative work environment as what she chose to handle.

Another middle manager went against the advice of those around her. She took a chance on hiring an overeducated analyst who had negative evaluations in his personnel file.

The person who was highest on the register was extremely over-qualified for the job… this person had a Ph.D. and years of teaching experience. He came in for the interview. I was very impressed with him. … We ordered his file from personnel. It was full of one problem after another. He had a history of problems, lawsuits and this sort of thing; one of them, for instance, was that his job was abolished and he lobbied hard to have the position not abolished. He had in his hand a letter of commendation saying, “this guy is great, rehire him for any kind of state job,” then in his file is this conflicting document coming from his former boss saying “No, don’t rehire him; he’s a jerk.”

Many managers would likely have routinely eliminated this applicant from the pool; thus an issue would never have arisen. That was the advice she received from her superior, who disagreed with, but did not oppose, her decision to hire the individual. Because many managers would never have considered hiring the individual in the first place, they would never have seen or grappled with this issue. This “problem” employee gave the department several good years, and then went off to a teaching career in higher education. The manager was proud that she was able not only to provide a good employee to the state, but also to rehabilitate the reputation of a capable individual.

The above middle managers went against the flow in the problems they chose to address. Not every manager entering an ineffective work environment will perceive it as such, and if they do, they may not choose to go against the decision environment by taking remedial action. Nor will the usual manager take the risk of hiring someone with negative comments in his resume.

One middle manager, who faced opposition from his supervisor, describes how he maintained his pilot program.

I had to use my personal relationship with them [the fire chiefs] to keep them from backing out of the project because they got nothing out of it. They were filling out the forms and mailing them in, but they were not getting anything back… It was just a matter of a personal relationship with some of them. Most of them, in fact, all the ten pilots [pilot projects] except one, hung in there just by my personal assurances. I kept telling them that someday we'll have
some support from upper level management, and then this project will get up and go.

This middle manager went beyond his job description to identify a problem and to convince others that the project was worth doing. He kept the project on the policy agenda.

These managers identified problems that would not have been identified by another manager if that manager had simply been working within the confines of the job description, the expectations of the decision environment, or a superior’s orders. In the case of the fire chief’s program that faced a hostile agency head, the manager could have just let the program fall by the wayside. These managers studied the situations, took risks and provided enhanced value to the citizens of Tennessee.

Issues and problems self-identified by middle managers ranged from important only to the unit that housed the manager, to minor innovation, to major change. The number of people that needed to be convinced that the problem merited attention increased as the impact of the change affected people and work units further afield from the manager’s own department. In all cases the manager’s initiative put the issue on the agenda, thereby creating the problem definition. Another manager in the same situation may not have identified the situation as an issue or problem to be addressed.

**Position, Politics, and Perspective in the Middle of the Organization**

The middle manager’s ability or personal willingness to identify problems is constrained by position in the hierarchy. Regular duties are prescribed, and the job description limits discretion. Tasks within the job description are usually clearly stated and offer limited problem identification latitude. Going against the cultural expectation increases the manager’s risk. Assignments and opportunities coming from outside the agency may offer variety, and perhaps some problem identification discretion.

Partisan politics was invisible in the middle managers’ problem identification activities. Politics is influenced by their clients’ perspectives and demands for service, but general public opinion does not influence middle manager selection of issues. If a significant political actor lobbied for policy action in a middle manager’s area of responsibility, the middle manager would be aware of the demand for change, but the middle manager would not make the decision on whether to address the issue or to favor one problem definition over another. Partisan demands appear not to influence problem identification by middle managers.

"Perspective" is harder to grasp. Self-identified issues are limited in scope by the middle manager’s location in the hierarchy. Commitment to doing a good job motivated some middle managers to tackle problems that previous middle managers had ignored. A middle manager’s individual preferences can influence what problems get addressed and what problems do not. The several examples of a middle manager choosing to consider a situation a significant problem needing solution illustrates how subjective construction of problems occurs at the middle manager level.
Position and perspective are the primary motivators in middle manager problem identification. Politics affects middle managers indirectly—issues that descend from above may have a political component, but partisan politics does not appear to affect directly the problem definition choices for middle managers.

**Executives**

Commissioners told significantly longer stories than did middle managers. Their narratives were embellished by vignettes and side stories filled with complications and intricacies. Although commissioners are not known to most citizens, as executives of state government departments they have a widespread and significant impact on the rules, regulations, and quality of life of the state’s citizens.

Unless Governor Alexander expressed an interest in the department and its agenda, the commissioner was unrestricted in determining what situations received attention. On the campaign trail prior to his first term Alexander promised to reduce the number of state employees. This task was delegated to Lewis Donelson, Commissioner of Finance and Administration, who relished the challenge. Half-way through the first term, and into the second term, education became Alexander’s priority. Because education reform demanded overcoming entrenched interests and raising taxes to pay for the reform, Alexander weighed in heavily to define the problem and mobilize support. Education commissioner McElrath spoke of working closely with the governor in fleshing out the state’s agenda for education. Only Donelson and McElrath linked Alexander to their stories.

Other commissioners were left alone, having almost unlimited authority to identify problems and to set their agendas. Bob Farris, upon accepting his responsibility as Commissioner of Transportation, recalled that Governor Alexander said, “Do a good job. If I have anything, I will call you. You will hear from me occasionally. You just go and do a good job.” Farris went on to say that the Governor had chosen education as the important issue for Tennessee, therefore it was up to him, Farris, to manage and direct the transportation department. This wide-ranging mandate to create an agenda for the department was echoed by the commissioners. Within the broad mandate of doing what needed to be done, the commissioners’ attention ranged from internal organization management to national policy.

Most commissioners were unfamiliar with their subordinates and with the organization; yet commissioners did not report seeking advice on agenda-setting from subordinates. Their usual contacts were with their predecessors, fellow commissioners, or friends. Most of these executives had obtained their government appointments because they were successful managers in other venues; so they had the self-confidence to figure out and act upon what needed to be done. Problems reached the commissioners’ agendas by being linked to the governor’s program, by the commissioner identifying problems that needed to be addressed, by issues forcing their way onto the commissioner’s agenda from the bureaucracy below, or from the legislature. Issues identified by the
Position: Governor heavily involved

In his run for re-election, the governor’s primary platform plank was a specific proposal to reform education; so the Department of Education was bound by that campaign promise. Commissioner McElrath told of the educational reform efforts, and his story illustrates a different picture than any other cabinet member regarding the role of the governor in policy making. The “education problem” was identified by the Governor. The commissioner joined the team composed of the Governor, his staff, and outside experts, with a mission to design, market, and implement a comprehensive package of educational reform. McElrath was the only commissioner who used the pronoun “we,” referring to the governor and himself, in the story he told. 4

In education, problem identification was the governor’s initiative. The governor acted as chief educational policy maker, and he defined the problem. McElrath said,

*I think all of us agreed that we felt that our children were just as intelligent as the children in the other 49 states, and yet we didn’t have favorable rankings in terms of student achievement, and we just couldn’t buy that, we couldn’t accept it.*

The commissioner acted as liaison between the education department and outside educational experts in creating the plan, and involved himself with selling the plan to the legislature, to school boards, and to teachers. But, since education was the central policy focus of the Governor, the commissioner’s problem identification activities were more limited than any other cabinet member. The governor took the lead in defining and focusing public attention in this area; the commissioner was a member of the governor’s team.

Position: Governor minimally involved

Reducing the number of state employees was the centerpiece of Alexander’s first election campaign. Not a policy initiative in the sense that the direction of government was to change; rather, this promise focused on efficient administration of the state. Defining the problem required identifying places in government where cuts could be made while maintaining service quality. This was a management problem, not a policy problem. Carrying out that campaign promise fell to the Commissioner of Finance and Administration, Lewis Donelson, who said;

*It was a campaign promise of the Governor, …the Governor and I agreed that there were probably too many people working for the state. I wanted to ….pay people better and have less of them.*

4 He and the Commissioner of Finance and Administration were the only cabinet members to have frequent personal contact with the Governor.
The promise of a free hand in accomplishing the material reduction in the state payroll was the incentive used by Alexander to entice Donelson to join his cabinet. The Governor had identified a problem to which Donelson was strongly committed. Having successfully recruited Donelson, the Governor turned specific problem identification, solution, and implementation over to him. Many governors make promises to reduce government. Alexander was fortunate to have a strong manager, Donelson, with the desire and the ability to accomplish the reduction.

Alexander consciously removed himself from the specifics of budget reduction so that he was more insulated from pressures to provide a service to a constituency or relief to a cabinet member. He committed to supporting Donelson’s decisions. Donelson recalled Governor Alexander saying,

“I’ll back you up 100%.” That’s why I never worried about him overruling me. Occasionally, he would have to tell a commissioner that he did not overrule me. That was really more in the beginning. We met with several commissioners and he said, “Lewie is running with that, it is going to be virtually impossible for you to get in to see me about it. Deal with him. Get your problems settled with him.”

Donelson described Alexander’s vision, He wanted to have the budget grow less than inflation, to materially reduce the state payroll, and he wanted to reduce the debt. Those were my real assignments, and basically his commitment to me was whatever you have to do, do; I’ll back you up.

Donelson assembled a task force dominated by cabinet members with business executive experience. The Governor attended the first meeting of the task force and laid out his goals for this reduction. From that point onward, fulfilling this campaign promise was the responsibility of the F&A Commissioner. Donelson planned and implemented the governor’s promise, “I wanted to improve the pay and reduce the payroll.” Note that Donelson uses the pronoun “I.” Donelson was in charge of budget cutting; cutting administrative costs and increasing pay were not a team effort led by the Governor. On the other hand, Education Commissioner McElrath used the pronoun “we” when discussing his relationship to the governor. McElrath was not in charge of the education initiative. In reducing the state payroll, the Governor outlined a broad goal, but the problem was defined and then the process directed by Donelson. Donelson cited this effort as “the most managerially demanding thing that I did when I was Commissioner.”

**Position: Problem Originating Below in the Bureaucracy**

Commissioners, like middle managers, are confronted by problems that come from below in the bureaucracy, problems that must be faced. The buck stops at the commissioner’s office. An assistant commissioner in the Department of Human Services (DHS) asked for the resignation of a counselor and a county
director of social services because of seemingly grossly unprofessional conduct surrounding a child sexual abuse case. Commissioner Sammie Lynn Puett was informed by her staff of the action that had been taken. As word of the resignations spread, the Commissioner was pulled into the controversy. Sorting through the differing interpretations of the situation became the Commissioner’s problem.

We thought that this was the worst professional judgment in action that we had seen. We got those resignations, I had them in hand about the time my phone started ringing about this horrible DHS that was about to fire two long-time employees…. We had all the newspapers trying to find out what we were doing to these two poor employees. But the confidentiality of the records [was involved]... the juvenile judge there was the former father-in-law of this girl… I had never heard of anything as complicated in my life. … The governor's office was getting telephone calls…It was really hard to sort out the facts of the situation, what really happened, what didn’t happen.

The central element in the case was suspected sexual abuse of a child by family members, but observers had divergent views of the situation. The professional DHS staffers saw the problem as maintaining professional standards, and they were demanding that those employees be fired. Other DHS employees, less informed and further from the situation, saw the problem as “the state office won’t back you up if you happen to make a wrong decision.” The local legislators saw the situation as problem of interface between their constituency and the state bureaucracy, so two state representatives transported the fired social workers to the Commissioner's office. The situation had further partisan potential because the director who was asked to resign was a daughter-in-law of the Republican Party state chairman. The local community “was up in arms because these were just great people” who were being fired, and “nobody in town thought that there was anything wrong with what had been done.” The governor’s office was being contacted by local citizens. The newspapers viewed the situation as a news story, but the ability to tell the state’s side was limited by issues of the confidentiality of the records and maintaining the child’s privacy.

The commissioner faced a range of plausible problem definitions from important constituencies of her department. Her challenge was deciding among the definitions. Had the controversy not emerged, she would likely have accepted the professional opinion in the department that the social workers should resign. The publicity expanded the issue into a new problem, which the commissioner articulated as follows:

The bottom line was that I also knew that we had to continue to work in that community. We were mandated by law to provide a full range of social services; family assistance programs, and so on. But our integrity was at stake, our ability to function as an office, that was part of what I had to salvage. [I needed to ensure that] … the appropriate discipline or professional action
was taken in this situation, but also to ensure that we could continue to carry out our responsibilities in that community.

What was defined initially as a problem of poor judgment by department employees, to be dealt with at the middle manager level, erupted into a situation defined by the Commissioner as a crisis of legitimacy for the department. The defined challenge was to create an environment so that the agency could function effectively in that county in the future. The issue landed on the commissioner’s desk because hers was the administrative position at the apex of the pyramid; the commissioner could not avoid the problem.

**Perspective: The Governor uninvolved and largely unaware**

Bob Farris, Commissioner of Transportation, was asked about Alexander's involvement in setting the department's agenda.

*He doesn’t come over here and mess with my department.....About once a year we sit down and I go through the program priorities that I am about to develop and I’ll explain ‘em and he’ll ask me questions. If he has some comment he makes it, most of the time he doesn’t. He does that with all the departments, but he’ll focus on certain select things, as a governor ought to do.*

Commissioner Hubert McCullough, Commissioner of Finance and Administration after Lewis Donelson and Bill Sansom, characterized his situation similarly.

*The governor and I have a pretty good understanding. I go about running the government, and he goes about doing those things that make Tennessee a better state... Or, I'll say it another way because I don’t want to come up sounding presumptuous or anything like that: we understand our roles. I understand what he wants me to do and I go about doing it. We don't waste a lot of conversation about it.*

The extensive discretion to decide their own agendas for their departments, coupled with the governor's limited agenda, meant that the commissioners had broad discretion to identify the problems that their departments would address without consulting the governor.

**Perspective: Commissioner identified the problem and convinced the governor to go along**

A firm believer in a strong education system, Commissioner Donelson (degrees from Choate, Rhodes, and Georgetown Law School) also believed that the University of Tennessee at Knoxville (UTK) needed to raise its standards to establish itself as a major state university and to distinguish itself from other state-supported schools. He tested his idea with a large group of administrators from UTK; naturally, his audience enthusiastically supported his proposal.
Before I told Jack Reese [UTK Chancellor] that I could actually do it .....I made a big speech at that meeting [department heads' retreat] about raising the standards, how UTK needed to get into the business of quality education and leave some of these other jobs to East Tennessee State and other places like that. The guys there absolutely loved it. They ate it with a spoon. Jack could sense that, and he was rolling with the tide.

Having received positive and public affirmation, Donelson leveraged this support, however contrived, to create a plan. He proposed that UTK receive the same amount of money the university had received the year before if Chancellor Reese agreed to raise the academic standards, which would reduce enrollment. When Donelson and Reese had general agreement on the policy, but before any formal decisions were made, Donelson approached the Governor for his support. Donelson indicated that this was a policy issue, as Donelson put it, “to what extent are we going to fund things, that was the kind of thing I would take to the Governor. … [I would take] anything that I thought had serious political ramifications for him.”

This issue was raised by Donelson, not the Governor. Donelson selected the problem, floated a trial balloon to generate support (the audience for the trial balloon was biased to support the proposal), and then took the situation to the Governor. Donelson convinced the Governor, and Alexander supported this decision of his chief administrator. Given agreement on the problem, the solution was easy to agree on. However, it was Donelson who identified the original problem based on his personal view of education and the role of the state’s flagship university.

Perspective: Commissioner-identified based on past experiences with government

Prior to becoming commissioner, Susan Simons had dealings with the Department of General Services by serving as the procurement officer in another agency. She related how a computer that she had requested had been held up by General Services for eighteen months.

It was my perception that this [General Service’s control orientation] was their major problem, and it did not take long after listening to other people to confirm that my perception was correct. This is a control agency, and it has no right to be a control agency. It is a service agency and that is the way it would most effectively service state government.

Having identified the problem from her own experience, and then having that perception reinforced by her colleagues, she decided early that changing the General Services from a control agency to a support agency was her mission. Her decision to attack this problem rather than other possible problems in the department was a personal decision. The governor had appointed her to do a job and she felt free to proceed to act as she saw fit.
Department of Personnel Commissioner Martha Olson also approached her new position from a perspective outside of the department she was administering. She gained experience in her former position, Commissioner of Revenue.

I did not want to make the same mistake I’d made in the Department of Revenue - not doing early on what I sensed needed to be done... So I worked early on to ask the experts in our organization confidentially to begin to look at the organization.

Martha Olson told of reorganizing the Department of Personnel. She saw the organization “set up as a result of people and not the functional aspects of the organization. It wasn’t an efficient organization.” Olson succeeded another Commissioner of Personnel interviewed for this project, Darrell Akins. Akins took on the challenge of initiating a large-scale reclassification project. To accomplish that task, he shuffled job descriptions to match people’s skills with the reclassification task demands. One executive’s effective structure was defined as a problem by the following executive. The task at hand is seen through the prism of one’s past experiences.

**Perspective: Commissioner identified by walking around**

Two commissioners indicated that they had accepted the position as department head without any preconceived notions of the problems facing the department. Both commissioners headed the Department of Transportation; so their definition of problems facing the department expands on the subjectivity of problem identification.

Commissioner Farris had a background in sales and marketing; he lacked road-building experience. To become knowledgeable regarding issues facing the department he talked to people throughout the organization, spent time reading the reports generated by the different divisions, and he visited work sites. He did this to “define our problems, both organizationally and programmatically.” Early, he identified an inventory problem.

I was making my initial tour of my garages and going through the warehouses. In the warehouse I noticed a stack of air filters covered with dust. I went out and blew the dust off, and it was an air filter for the Ford Edsel. I don’t know how many Edsels we had at the time ....The guy there had ordered 24 filters because they came 24 to a case. And they are still there.

Suspecting inventory as a problem, Farris began to delve more deeply. By examining inventory and requisition forms he confirmed his suspicion that the problem extended beyond the one particular garage and included excessive use of some DOT supplies. For instance, water coolers were replaced four times more frequently in one field office than the others. It would appear that the coolers were walking. To Farris, excessive inventory, ineffectively monitored, was a significant agency problem that needed to be addressed.
Bill Sansom joined the Department of Transportation with an engineering background, but also without any sense of the state’s key transportation problems. He drove the highway system among the major cities in Tennessee, “and it became clear pretty quickly that route I-440 was the number one challenge in Nashville.” Having identified this section of road as a problem, Samson began to investigate the court case that had halted the construction.

Both Farris and Sansom oversaw the same department, but to hear them describe the Department of Transportation, you would not be so sure. They chose identical strategies—“walking around”—to discover the principal initiatives needed in the department, but the two commissioners saw totally different agency priorities. The lenses they used to identify pressing issues derived from what made them successful in their prior careers—controlling inventory for Farris and construction projects for Sansom.

Hubert McCullough and Lewis Donelson were both commissioners of Finance and Administration. Raising UTK’s admission standards was identified by Donelson based on his own interest in higher education. Commissioner McCullough, a businessman with property investments, indicated that “when I got there I made a list of a dozen things that I thought that I wanted as Commissioner of Finance.” One that he chose to talk about was to manage better the physical space of government, a problem that had been around for years. He chose as a priority a project directly related to an area in which he had expertise.

*I thought the state leased an inordinate amount of space…[this problem] was not even creative thought on my part, but it had been talked about. Senator Motlow, former senator and now dead, had great building plans but they just never got off the ground. So I don’t take any credit for having thought about it, perhaps I had a little something to do with getting it started and getting it on track.*

These problems did not demand the involvement of the Governor. Executives picked these topics based upon their backgrounds and experience. Engineers see engineering problems. Retailers see inventory problems. People with real estate expertise see physical plant problems.

**Politics: Legislator involvement in problem identification**

The legislative branch was involved in the problem identification process described above with the Department of Human Services because a legislator accompanied the accused state workers to the Commissioner’s office. However, that was the extent of legislator involvement. The legislator provided access to the department head for his constituents. All legislators perform this constituency service function in order to maintain and cultivate electoral support in the district. To the extent that legislator involvement influenced the commissioner’s definition of the problem, it did so only to ensure that the workers’ side of the story was told to the person who would ultimately make the decision on their fate. Also, the

---

5 Donelson later served on the Tennessee Higher Education Commission.
legislature was involved in the Education proposal in which Governor Alexander took an active role.

An individual legislator also was mentioned in Commissioner McCullough’s story about expanding the building plan for the state. McCullough resurrected a dormant plan, authored originally by a state senator, for constructing state office buildings. McCullough's linking his proposal to that of Senator Motlow communicated that this problem was identified by the legislature earlier, thereby seeking to broaden sponsorship of the building plan.

Individual legislators can shape the way the problem reaches the table for discussion. Commissioner Word, Department of Health, told about dealing with a problem of poor nursing home care that was identified by a legislator. The Commissioner distinguished "representative" politics from "partisan" politics. In the Commissioner’s view the nursing home case represented partisan politics because it did not involve rational debate about alternative methods to encourage nursing homes to maintain an appropriate standard of care. Rather, the debate was accusatory and visible. The legislator was trying to force onto the agency the power to punish agency wrong-doers. According to the legislator, because the Department of Health lacked punitive powers it did a poor job of monitoring nursing home care. In the legislator’s view, to maintain quality nursing home care the Department of Health needed civil penalties in order to punish wrong-doers. Commissioner Word defined the problem differently, as "lack of appropriate care" rather than as "absence of civil penalties." In Commissioner Word's view,

[The legislature] in January hands me a piece of legislation that gives me the authority to issue civil penalties. Then they go home in May. They would show up next January and ask if everything was all fixed. It was obvious to me that I could not allow that to happen, mainly because this agency would be committed to something that it could not deliver.

Partisan politics was being fought over the problem definition, as a Democratic legislator mobilized her party against the administration. With partisanship in play, problem definition did not emerge from a rational situation assessment; rather, the disagreement over the problem played out in public meetings, in the legislature, and in the press. In the end, the Commissioner was able to fend off the legislator's definition of the problem and to address the situation under his own problem definition. Commissioner Word, a career employee who had worked his way up the ranks over many years and had served as a middle manager in the department with several Democratic administrations, had credibility with the legislature and could be aggressive without incurring the wrath of the legislative leadership.

Commissioner Akins, Department of Personnel, an Alexander Republican loyalist, shows how sensitive commissioners usually are to the risk of offending the legislature. Akins, having defined the large number of civil service job categories as obstacles to effective administration, set about to reclassify civil service positions. He worried that reclassification would become politicized.
The legislature was concerned that this thing was just going to be a political thing, that the Republicans would get raises and the Democrats would be screwed over… I was always scared to death that we would become a campaign issue.

The legislative branch is involved directly in defining problems—as in the nursing home situation or civil service reclassification. Commissioner McCullough in his building plan tried to use politics to leverage his proposal by mentioning a prominent former legislator. Linking his plan with the former legislator communicated that this problem was responding to a need identified by the legislature earlier, thereby perhaps broadening ownership of the building plan. If the Republican administration’s problem definitions were perceived as seeking political advantage, a legislature with Democratic Party majorities in both houses could change the nature of problem identification from a focus on “what needs improving” to a focus on “who is getting what.” The risk faced by a commissioner is that identifying any issue in a way that can be perceived as partisan increases the likelihood of adverse repercussions for the agency, other administration-supported legislation, and electoral politics.

The legislature and the department heads are bound together in the policy making process through the budgetary, constituent service, and oversight processes in the legislature. When a departmental issue becomes politicized, the number of participants in the process increases, and executive control of the process diminishes. Consequently, the department executives all mentioned that they spent time talking to legislators and making sure that relations between the department and the legislature were as amicable as possible.

Position, Perspective and Politics at the Top of the Organization

A newly appointed cabinet member may know little about the agency’s primary tasks, and even less about the agency’s management team, yet this executive must walk in and immediately take charge. The commissioner, as organization executive, selects the problems to be handled by the department, and the problems chosen by the commissioner can have broad impact on the citizens of the state. The decentralized management system used by Governor Alexander allowed the agency executive to pursue a personally-defined agenda.

The executive’s perspective on departmental problems is more significant than the middle manager’s perspective. Unlike the middle manager, the executive’s preferences play an important part in defining a departmental mission. Previous experience, whether in the substantive area of the organization, state government operations, or the political process, is related to the executive’s problem identification activities.

Partisan politics has the potential to permeate each issue that touches the executive level. Coping with policy demands made by political actors is a commissioner task. Bargaining-compromise-accommodation activities, rooted in
partisan politics, impinge upon the problem identification activities of the top department executives because it is an undeniable and legitimate element in their work environment.

Regardless of the decision latitude, commissioners face problems bubbling up from below. These are inevitable. Regardless of partisan politics and personal preferences, the commissioner is heading an operating agency of government and must deal with the problems reaching that level.

Conclusion
Problems reach the manager's agenda by one of three portals: position, politics, or perspective. First, the problem can be within one's position description. It's a solid waste problem, and you are the Director of Solid Waste. Or, you are responsible for antiquities, and an Indian burial site is found within a highway right-of-way. The problem comes directly to you. Second, politics pushes a problem onto your desk. People complain to the governor that they face long lines getting their drivers' licenses, and the problem is routed from the Governor’s office to the Commissioner of Safety; or the governor promises to reduce duplication in various kinds of inspections, and you are charged with inspecting the state’s grocery stores or restaurants. Third, “perspective” is an important aspect of problem identification under-appreciated in the administrative literature. Perspective impacts the problem-identification phase by framing a situation based upon the manager’s vision or idea for something that needs to be done.

This aspect of problem identification, called agenda-setting in the policy-making literature, has not received much attention in the administrative arena. Governor Alexander’s devolved management system encouraged commissioners to seek out and address needs within the agency’s domain of responsibility. In studying our interviews with ten outstanding members of Alexander’s cabinet, we found that the issues a cabinet member chooses to work on are strongly influenced by the cabinet member’s past experiences. An agency’s agenda is often better understood as created in the mind of the executive than as having a consensually agreed, objective reality. This finding about problem definition at the state government level supports the assumption of reality as constructed, and has important implications both for understanding cabinet behavior and for counseling a governor on cabinet recruitment.

Finally, middle managers’ problem identification process differed from the executives. Position in the hierarchy was the predominate determiner of problem identification. Perspective had a role to play but only if the problem was within the scope of the managers authority.

References:


