The American County
Frontiers of Knowledge

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Strengthening County Management

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County governments have experienced dramatic changes over the past two decades. While they once struggled for acceptance as legitimate members of the governmental community, they now frequently sit at the center of a complex web of local, state, national, and international interests. There are some parallels between the changes in county government and the developmental history of municipalities, but counties are doing more than merely following along in municipal footsteps. Counties have been forced to deal with a massive array of problems more or less at the same time, while municipalities have gradually increased their management capacity over a much longer period. As they struggle to cope, many counties must also come to grips with rapidly escalating demands for urban-type services, the continued devolution of federal domestic policy responsibilities, and the growing interdependencies of city, county, regional, national, and international economies (Luke 1991, 1992).

In response to their changing responsibilities, American counties have been adopting more modern governmental structures, exchanging political bosses for merit appointments, and attempting to deliver a wider mix of services in a more effective manner. Like municipal governments, counties are finding it necessary to recruit professionally trained administrators who are expected to play important leadership roles (Stone, Price, and Stone 1940; Robert Denhardt 1985; Green 1985; Nalbandian 1990). But county governments are more likely to need administrators with the strong bargaining and integrative skills that municipal governments have only started to emphasize (Svara, ed., 1993). County managers are more apt to encounter elected officials with strong partisan orientations, they cannot draw on the same heritage of professionalism, and they seldom possess the same grants of authority (Svara 1993b). Their success is more likely to depend on their powers of persuasion and their ability to develop coalitions of like-minded individuals and groups. These types of shared-power relationships are becoming increasingly common in the public sector (Bryson and Crosby 1992), but this is one area where there is a notable divergence between city and county managers.

Successful leaders in today’s urban counties must be able to find ways to
thrive in an increasingly complex political environment. Merely mastering the nuts and bolts of service delivery will not be enough; they must also become masters at gathering information, such as the “get it all together” generalist managers described by Harlan Cleveland (1985). County leaders must be able to acquire knowledge and wisdom that can only come from absorbing and interpreting information from a variety of sources. Once acquired, such skills will enable officials to connect with key external actors, whether across the street at city hall or far away, and to work effectively with professional colleagues and elected officials throughout the intergovernmental system. Although managers of small, rural counties may still depend heavily on traditional management and technical skills, they too must address an ever-changing kaleidoscope of issues and interact with an increasing number of citizens, neighborhood groups, and special-interest lobbyists.

This chapter develops and discusses an agenda that might be drawn upon to strengthen the management of the American county. Although the discussion focuses primarily on urban counties experiencing managerial stress, some suggestions should benefit rural counties as well. The agenda sketched out in this chapter seeks to generate debate and discussion in the practitioner and academic communities concerning the management skills and knowledge needed in American counties.

AN AGENDA FOR REFORM

Although counties have made considerable progress over the past two decades in strengthening their management capacity, the pace of change will be difficult to maintain. We are entering an era when slow incremental change is unlikely to yield worthwhile benefits. The necessary level of management excellence can only come from sustained, collaborative efforts by a host of persons, groups, and organizations. The complex problems facing counties require thorough analysis, specialized knowledge, and multiple perspectives or worldviews. No single official or county can be expected to develop comprehensive solutions to a wide range of complex problems. Help will be needed from a variety of external sources, including federal agencies, state governments, municipal governments, professional associations such as the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), consultants, universities, and academic researchers. The resources and talent of these diverse groups, if tapped, could produce the following benefits:

An Improved County Government Support Network. Such a network will develop from linkages with those institutions and groups that take an ongoing interest in fostering the continued development of county governments. An example of the type of contribution an external actor can make can be seen in the
historical relationship between municipal governments and the ICMA (Stillman 1974). Involvement by a number of different actors could create a level of synergy that would greatly amplify any individual contributions. Researchers could aid the development of this support network by examining current educational and training programs and the needs of county government leaders.

Improved County Leadership Capacity. Better leadership will require a greater understanding of the relationship between county governmental structures and management effectiveness. For example, more needs to be known about the leadership potential of county managers (Svara 1993b). It seems likely that significant improvements in this area will require further expansion of county home-rule authority and increased use of alternate governmental forms. General knowledge about the leadership skills and strategies that would be most effective in the political environment of counties would also be useful.

Improved Knowledge of Management Tools. Practical knowledge is needed of the management tools that are most useful to county leaders. Researchers, professional associations, consultants, and county leaders must work together to learn more about this subject and disseminate new knowledge.

Although this agenda consists of three separate items, real progress likely will require simultaneous action, partly because the support network must serve as an incubator for the development of leadership capacity and knowledge of management tools. Also, it is presumed that there is considerable overlap between leadership capacity and knowledge of management tools. The exact mix of skills needed will depend to some extent on the circumstances of individual county leaders, but further development of county government capacity clearly requires progress in both areas. On the whole, failure in any one facet could jeopardize the entire agenda. Figure 8.1 displays the relationships among the three areas.

IMPROVED MANAGEMENT REQUIRES STRONGER SUPPORT STRUCTURES

County management skill levels will not increase or develop spontaneously. Strong linkages with support structures will be necessary to achieve and maintain a high level of performance. To some extent, county governments can rely on the traditional support structures of municipal governments, but it cannot be assumed that these sources can meet all county needs, which include formal classroom instruction, educational materials, training programs, and technical assistance. Likely components of this support network include academic researchers, universities, professional associations, and consultants. The following efforts could help meet county government needs:

Formal Education. Universities could help develop and maintain county-
government-management skills by informing students about the importance of county government and the positive and negative aspects of careers in this field. They could provide detailed information about county-government structure and operation, insights into appropriate management tools, and an understanding of the political environment. Formal education programs could also provide internship opportunities that support professional growth and development.

*Educational Materials.* University faculty could play a role in developing educational materials, including course textbooks, scholarly articles, course syllabi, and perhaps even videos and films. Professional associations and consultants could also play an important role in these areas.

*Training Programs.* Training programs could help fill the gap where formal education ends and professional careers begin and continue. State departments, universities, professional associations, and consultants could offer special programs for county leaders. Cooperative action among these groups would be ideal.

*Technical Support.* Many issues facing county governments require basic technical knowledge. This type of assistance requires the help of a wide range of specialists and materials. State departments or professional associations could take the lead in developing and distributing needed materials. Consultants could also play an important role.

Although many observers might believe that counties can receive a great deal of support from the nation’s colleges and universities, there is reason to doubt whether this is really the case, in part because the educational needs of municipal and county governments have attracted little scholarly interest. Only
a minority of masters of public administration programs have developed a strong local-government focus (Stillman 1974; NASPAA 1990; Streib 1995). It is little wonder that a committee jointly sponsored by the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) and the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) maintains that local-government education is often the “accidental by-product of other professional education programs” (Banovetz, ed., 1989, 2). Similar criticism has been proffered by a longtime city manager who argues that city managers suffer from “dysfunctional education” (Kirchhoff 1990, 2).

To a great extent, public-administration programs and faculty have clung to a generalist perspective (Schott 1976; Mosher 1968; Robert Denhardt 1982; Golembiewski 1983) that has done little to foster the development of specialized skills in most public-administration subfields. This lack of specialized knowledge obviously limits the ability of university faculty to develop educational materials, offer training programs, or supply technical support. Peter Szanton’s (1981) findings that universities typically fail to serve urban needs remain largely valid in the 1990s. Szanton found that academics prioritized teaching and research and had little interest in providing practical advice to front-line managers. Although Szanton concluded that many university failings stemmed from the general difficulty of aiding urban governments, additional research by Roy E. Green (1989) shows that city managers prefer training by ICMA specialists or state association staff rather than by university faculty. Also, D. D. Dunn, F. K. Gibson, and J. Whorton (1985) report that local governments are more likely to turn to consulting firms for technical assistance than they are to regional or state universities. Although it is easy to point out universities that excel at local-government-management education or community service, such institutions appear to constitute noteworthy exceptions.

Without strong support from colleges and universities, county governments must rely on the help provided by professional associations, state agencies, and/or consulting firms. Although county governments have lacked a national association dedicated to supporting the programmatic development of management training skills, the International City Management Association’s recent change to the International City/County Management Association is an encouraging development. In some cases, state governments may be able to offer substantial assistance, but the evidence strongly suggests that county leaders prefer to manage their own affairs (Streib and Waugh 1991b, 1991c). Consultants can be a good resource for well-defined problems or issues, but they cannot offer the broad-based assistance that a professional association might provide. Professional associations are also more likely to view themselves as information providers than as salespersons for particular products or services.

County leaders can help themselves by continuing to develop their advocacy
skills. Either as individual governments or as part of larger associations they must continually bring attention to their needs, which will require the development of an improved understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses. Researchers can make a valuable contribution by focusing effort on the types of relationships that exist between county governments and support providers, paying close attention to whether these efforts fulfil existing needs. In time, they also need to examine the support needs of the entire county workforce. Such efforts might expand on the work that David Hinton and John Kerrigan (1980, 1989) and James D. Slack (1990a, 1990b) have done on the support needs of municipal governments.

LEADERSHIP CAPACITY IS CRITICAL TO FURTHER PROGRESS

External support is important, but the fate of individual counties is likely to rest with the quality of their leaders. Many are large service organizations and are extremely dependent on the motivation of their workforces. Good leadership can help to give county workers a sense of purpose and direction (Bennis and Nanus 1985; Kouzes and Posner 1987; Kotter 1990), and provide the level of integration (Hosmer 1982; August U. Smith 1989; Streib 1992) needed to keep counties operating smoothly. County governments require individuals, elected and appointed, who can provide a meaningful vision of the future; communicate that vision effectively; bring friends, competitors, and opponents together through bargaining, negotiation, and mediation; and display the appropriate values that will assure enduring public benefits. These "get it all together" skills will be essential to county leaders.

Of course, management strategies that stress worker empowerment will require these types of leadership skills throughout the management hierarchy, regardless of governmental form or structure. As Robert Denhardt (1993, 133) has noted, many public leaders are committed to "deepened involvement of lower level participants in organizational decision making." Developing this broad base of leadership talent will obviously strain support structures to their limits, but failure to develop these skills is likely to have a negative impact on a wide variety of county activities.

Structure as an Obstacle to Leadership Development

Attaining effective leadership in county governments is especially challenging because of the dominance of the commission form of government (DeSantis 1989; Streib and Waugh 1991b, 1991c). Although there is little solid evidence that some governmental forms are superior to others, the commission form of gov-
ernment has been a lightning rod for criticism since the early stages of the municipal-reform movement (Gilbertson 1917). This governmental form generally consists of a three- or five-person elected board whose members share authority and operational responsibility. Critics charge that this arrangement suffers from fragmentation of authority and the lack of a politically accountable chief executive. As Richard S. Childs commented more than sixty years ago, "As a form of government—if indeed so formless and ramshackle a thing can be said to be a form—it is distinguished from customary practice in other jurisdictions by the lack of a chief executive" (1925, 3). This statement still echoes in the 1990s.

Many counties have replaced the commission form of government with either an appointed administrator or an elected executive, but the commission form still dominates the county landscape (Jeffery, Salant, and Boroshok 1989). Researchers could help by illuminating the relationship between county-government performance and governmental forms. Also, more information about the relative leadership effectiveness of appointed administrators and elected executives is needed.

It should not be assumed, however, that simply increasing the number of county administrators or executives will bring immediate improvements in leadership capacity. Apart from the partisan nature of county politics, county officials commonly share authority with a variety of elected constitutional officers. This practice can be traced back to the colonial period and is a widely recognized management constraint (Childs 1925; Snider 1952; Cape 1967; Zeller 1975). Although their research did not directly address the issue of leadership capacity, Gregory Streib and William L. Waugh, Jr., (1991c) recently found 63 percent of the county administrators and 57 percent of the county executives who responded to a survey cited the high number of elected department heads as a major concern.

**Essential Leadership Skills**

Whether or not they experience structural reforms, it is still important for county leaders to cultivate the kinds of skills that will help them to develop support for their ideas and motivate others. A model developed by Mark A. Abramson (1989) and illustrated in figure 8.2 provides a useful starting point for discussing those skills that will be most important.

*Vision.* Leadership requires vision, defined as "an alternative future to the status quo" (Abramson 1989, 563). Warren Bennis and B. Nanus (1985) found that the ability to define and pursue an attractive organizational future was a key component of effective leadership. Furthermore, J. M. Kouzes and B. Posner found that articulating a vision is one important aspect of motivating organizations to do extraordinary things (1987). County leaders can use their sense of
L = VCH

Where L is LEADERSHIP

V is VISION

C is COMMUNICATION

H is HARD WORK

Fig. 8.2 Critical Leadership Components

vision to build a high level of commitment among other members of the management team and other county employees (Cayer 1993). It could also help them focus the efforts of diverse constituencies toward specific tasks.

Communication. Effective leaders must be able to articulate their visions in a way that attracts the attention and captures the imagination of others (Abramson 1990; Peters 1988; Kouzes and Posner 1988). Presentation, writing, and general communication skills are important elements of effective communication and can be used to persuade others to accept ideas.

Hard Work. Hard work by county leaders sets an example for the workforce, which may help morale in counties that are struggling with pressures to produce high-quality services with inadequate resources.

Of all the leadership components detailed by Abramson, vision is the most important for county leaders. They must be able to assess the critical dimensions of their environment and chart directions that energize and inspire others to share their views. Such cooperation is impossible unless leaders are able to develop a vision from the latent and often unfocused desires of relevant actors and groups. Robert Denhardt and Kevin Prelovsk use the term social development to describe this type of leadership. It “gives priority to the needs and desires of the members of the group rather than the power wielder” (1992, 37). This facili-
tative approach could help county leaders establish clear priorities while resolving conflict.

Apart from a sense of vision, county leaders also need interpersonal skills that will help them win support for their ideas (Svara, ed., 1993). For example, socially outgoing leaders would be able to make the most of opportunities to communicate their ideas to others. It is also helpful if leaders possess the skills necessary to collaborate with others, foster cooperation, support negotiation, and manage conflict (Herrman 1994). At a practical level, however, it should be noted that these efforts entail some risk. Appointed county administrators must walk a fine line between their administrative duties and responsibilities and involvement in what are essentially political activities. It should come as some comfort, though, that many writers have long argued that municipal managers play an important political role (Bosworth 1958; Kammerer et al. 1964; Wright 1969; Ammons and Newell 1988). More recently, John Nalbandian has argued that “city management has become a politically active profession” (1989, 183). County managers will have to cultivate the ability to facilitate the growth and development of others without becoming intimately involved in overtly partisan political affairs and activities.

Values Constitute an Essential Part of Effective Leadership

The values of county leaders are especially important because they must work closely with a diverse set of internal and external constituents and politically powerful friends and opponents. Moreover, values offer guidance when reconciling competing perspectives on policy decisions and imagining alternative futures. They can help county leaders cope with the disorder and ambiguity that inevitably occur when attempting to serve multiple masters or sovereigns (Peters 1988; Robert Denhardt 1993). Given that county leaders are typically in an environment of confusion and conflict, they must place great reliance on their own value systems.

The types of values that will be important are just as likely to come from our national political heritage as from traditional management theory. As Nalbandian (1990) points out, the single-minded pursuit of efficiency is no longer enough. The most desirable values for county leaders are those that stress enduring social and democratic principles such as openness, participation, and fairness rather than administrative expediency or short-term fixes that may be politically attractive. Nalbandian argues for values such as representation, individual rights, and social equity. Other writers suggest “regime values” (Rohr 1989), democratic ideals (Kathryn Denhardt 1989), and civic duty (Newland 1985). Decisions consistent with these values would help to strengthen and invigorate our society as a laboratory of democracy.
Apart from the values they apply, county leaders also need to develop longer time horizons. They need to consider the effects of their actions over the long term (Luke 1991, 1992). Many decisions made by county leaders may affect future generations or residents not involved in current decision-making processes. Seeking to maintain intergenerational equity should be an important ethical concern. County leaders must adopt an ethic of stewardship acknowledging that "people are the custodians and stewards of a precious natural order and have a creative role in enhancing it as well as being among its participants" (Atfield 1983, 63).

A final value is the way that county leaders conduct themselves. They must be approachable and open to new ideas (Robert Denhardt 1993). They should not become so myopic that they lose respect for the ideas of others. Cleveland expressed support for personal openness when he argued that generalists must show "a genuine interest in what other people think and what makes them tick" (1985, 161). The challenge for county leaders will be to maintain personal openness in the conflict-laden environments that often characterize county governments, especially in urban and urbanizing regions.

**KNOWLEDGE OF EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT TOOLS IS ESSENTIAL FOR SUCCESS**

Leadership is important, but county leaders also must use appropriate management tools to solve problems. They can rely on trained staff members to some extent, but they must possess knowledge about how to get the job done. Academic researchers, professional associations, and consultants can help guide county leaders to the management tools and techniques that are most effective. Although the exact needs of county leaders need to be cataloged, experience with municipal governments suggests that a thorough knowledge of housekeeping tools, strategic decision making, management control, and evaluation methods is needed.

**Housekeeping Tools**

Apart from whatever new challenges may be over the horizon, all counties must perform a number of basic functions, and county leaders need the requisite management and technical skills to assure that these tasks are carried out in a professional manner. These functions include financial management (payroll, accounting, inventory, purchasing, and so forth); personnel management (recruitment and selection, job classification, performance appraisal, benefits administration, and so on); risk management; contract management; basic services, such
as voter registration, tax assessment and collection, law enforcement, and road construction; and facilities maintenance.

These areas are more critical than they may seem because they absorb the lion's share of county budgets. Also, if not handled correctly, any one of these functional areas could cause major problems. Poor performance-appraisal systems can result in expensive lawsuits, overassessment of residential property can cause citizen outrage, and mistakes in important contracts can lead to wasted public funds. Also, in a service-oriented economy, the public has begun to set higher standards for service provision. Unsatisfactory government services are likely to produce negative publicity and disgruntled citizens. Such problems diminish the image of county government and waste scarce time and energy. When county governments become bogged down in routine tasks, their capacity to deal creatively with problems and exploit opportunities is diminished significantly.

**Strategic Decision Making**

Good county housekeeping may once have sufficed for good management, but such is no longer the case. Modern county governments must find solutions to complex and perplexing problems. County leaders must be able to identify critical issues and direct the search for solutions. Tools for strategic decision making, management control, and evaluation can provide valuable support. As figure 8.3 shows, there is a strong relationship between housekeeping tools and those that focus mainly on problem-solving activities. Housekeeping activities keep routine processes stable so that counties can proceed through the cyclical process of strategic decision making, implementation, management control, and evaluation. Strategic decision making is critical to this cyclical process because it can help counties respond quickly and effectively to external threats and opportunities (Eadie 1986, 1989; John Maxwell 1990). There are many different approaches to strategic decision making (Sorkin, Ferris, and Hudak 1984; Streib 1991); however, all begin with development of a mission statement, an assessment of organizational strengths and weaknesses, and an understanding of the external environment (Eadie 1983; Bryson 1988).

Although little is known about the current usage of strategic decision making in county governments, there is ample evidence that it is common in municipal governments (Streib and Poister 1990; Streib 1991). Strategic decision making will likely become commonplace in counties, but many questions remain about how to use it most effectively. Future research and practical experience should provide some answers. Many authors have argued that early approaches to strategic decision making such as strategic planning have not been useful for government activities because they frequently produce thorough and insightful plans that are not used (Eadie 1989; Gray 1986). Research on municipal govern-
ments suggests that few local governments have developed the level of management sophistication needed to make full use of strategic decision making (Streib and Poister 1990; Streib 1992).

The literature suggests that county leaders can make the most immediate use of strategic-decision-making techniques by developing their environmental-assessment skills. To do so will require county leaders to use their intuition and information about the history of their county, available assets, citizen desires, and external social, economic, and political factors. Although this process involves some data gathering, county leaders also need to develop a more humanistic perspective on county activities, which means that they will have to seek out knowledgeable individuals and groups and involve them in assessment processes (Bryson and Crosby 1992). The information gathered and the networks established should help county leaders develop practical solutions to complex problems. However, officials should be careful not to develop elaborate strategic-decision-making processes that will be difficult to maintain. Beyond developing environmental-assessment skills, leaders can work closely within the networks they have developed to set strategies and goals for county activities (Streib 1991; Gabris 1989, 1992).

County leaders should be forewarned, however, that setting goals is not likely to be easy (Olsen and Eadie 1982; Bryson and Roering 1988; Klay 1989). Goal setting is a political process because it determines what issues will receive the greatest concentration of resources. County leaders may find it hard to focus
fragmented county governments on a specific agenda. In this area, the leadership skills of county leaders will have great importance. If they cannot manage to negotiate the goal-setting process, it is unlikely that they will find solutions to county problems. Of course, even after county leaders establish goals, there will be many opportunities for others to derail their plans.

Management-Control Tools

The purpose of management control is to assure that implementation of policies and programs is consistent with goals and objectives. Control processes begin with the establishment of meaningful performance indicators. Sources of data can include internal records, accounting data, observational counts and physical inspections, and customer surveys. The usefulness of this information can vary greatly according to the type of indicators used, the type of measurements made, and the type of analysis. Participants in the county support network can help identify the most useful measures and the most effective analytical approaches.

Full utilization of performance data will require a management system that links performance levels and goals and objectives. An effective management system will modify goals and objectives in response to environmental changes (Steiss 1982, 1985). Research on municipal governments by Theodore H. Poister and Streib (1989) found that the use of system-oriented tools such as zero-based budgeting, planning-programming-budgeting (PPB), and management by objectives (MBO) increased dramatically between 1976 and 1987. Also, respondents to their study report that these tools are most effective when used citywide. These findings illustrate the growing need for mechanisms to monitor and control the problem-solving activities of local governments. Moreover these tools can help county governments remain focused on critical tasks, solve problems effectively, and contain rising costs.

PPB and MBO are apt to aid the development of effective management control systems for modern counties and can effectively support efforts to develop strategic decision making. PPB provides a top-down perspective on the relationship between resource allocations and the accomplishment of program tasks, which would support the development of clear linkages between expenditures and the goals and objectives developed by county leaders as a part of strategic decision-making exercises.

Even though PPB is a powerful management tool, county leaders must realize they will need to employ many management tools if they expect to meet all of their needs. Poister and Streib (1989) have documented that municipal managers employ a wide variety of different tools. For example, PPB can focus atten-
tion on program objectives, but it does little to assure that the activities of individual county employees are consistent with these objectives. MBO can help in this area. Recent survey findings reported by Poister and Streib found that MBO was used by 50 percent of the responding municipalities, with 30 percent using it citywide and 20 percent in selected areas. MBO was rated very effective by 28 percent of those who used it and somewhat effective by 68 percent. It was viewed as most effective for keeping a focus on priorities, coordinating goals, and maintaining control. The stronger relationships between managers and employees fostered by MBO could help county leaders emphasize the importance of specific objectives and maintain quality service provision.

County governments may also find that a well-designed management information system (MIS) (a formal network to provide management information for decision making) can aid management-control efforts. “The goal of MIS is to get correct information to the appropriate manager at the right time, in a useful form” (Dock and Wetherbe 1988, 85–86). Although it would clearly be useful for county leaders to have current information readily available about critical county activities, such easy access can be difficult to attain. Modern computer technology has greatly increased the ability to collect and store data, but organizing this data into useful formats has proven a daunting challenge. A number of authors have noted disillusionment with MIS (Mintzberg 1990; Klay 1989).

One possible goal would be for county governments to develop decision support systems, which would be flexible and lend themselves to examining a number of different types of issues. Such systems would access and combine data from a number of different sources and could also contain a number of standardized routines for analyzing county issues. Unfortunately, such systems remain largely in the conceptual stages of development (Swain and White 1992), and their true value remains uncertain.

Despite the promise of high-tech decision-making systems, it may be that the greatest contribution of computer technology to county government will be in communication. “With the advent of desk-top publishing, electronic mail, electronic bulletin boards, closed circuit television, satellite hook-up, and tele-conferencing, chief executive officers can reach almost every employee directly” (Halachmi 1991, 242). This technology can greatly influence the ability of county leaders to communicate their vision and values to county employees and influence their behavior. A possible negative aspect of this technology is that it may further diffuse communication within county governments. “With computer communication, such as electronic and voice mail, and with the use of networks and bulletin boards, a worker can seek assistance and advice from other members of the organization, other members of his or her profession, or any other interested party” (245). Although there are many benefits to be derived from
these types of improved communication, it will increase the difficulty of maintaining management control, because employees will be receiving information and direction from a variety of sources.

**Evaluation Methods**

Management information systems and other tools such as MBO and PPB can offer many insights into the efficiency and effectiveness of county activities. For example, management information systems can identify sources of waste in service provision and MBO can help supervisors gain a better understanding of the problems that employees encounter when performing their jobs. Similar insights can come from the budget process. However, a formal evaluation process can help assure that information from all of these sources receives the attention of appropriate officials.

Most county leaders probably understand that evaluation can be useful in making decisions to expand, contract, or continue existing programs, but they should also know that it can aid program implementation. These formative evaluations can help assure that programs get off to a good start. Because such assessments take place before programs are fully developed, they can catch problems before they become serious. Summative evaluations, which take place after programs have been in operation for a substantial period of time, can help by examining “what took place and how it contributed to the alleged results” (Halachmi 1992, 216), but formative evaluations can help to assure that serious problems are avoided.

Whether the information used in evaluation processes comes from the control process, a formative evaluation, or a sophisticated summative evaluation, it is important that the findings be incorporated into the strategic-decision-making process. These sources will provide valuable information about county problem-solving strategies.

**County Governments and Total Quality Management**

One of the most important trends in public management is the flourishing interest in total quality management (TQM), a management philosophy that “1) identifies and corrects problems by means of data, not opinions or emotions; 2) empowers employees and uses teams to identify and solve problems; and 3) continuously seeks to improve the entire organization’s ability to meet or exceed the demands of internal and external customers” (Kline 1992, 7). There can be little doubt that TQM is a hot topic in public-management circles. It almost seems a requirement that every major journal issue now feature at least one article about TQM. Terms such as *quality, customer service, teamwork, continuous*
improvement, empowerment, and employee involvement have become passwords that allow managers, in both the private and public sectors, membership into a kind of elite corps dedicated to changing the nature of work in the United States.

Recent survey findings reported by Streib and Poister (1994), show that TQM has made strong headway into municipal governments with populations between twenty-five thousand and one million. Twenty-seven percent of the respondents reported that they used TQM in selected areas, and 12 percent indicated citywide use. Slightly more than 25 percent of the respondents agreed that TQM was very effective, and the vast majority of the respondents agreed that it was somewhat effective. The ratings were considerably more positive among the citywide users. Although neither the level of use of TQM nor the effectiveness ratings compared well with other more established management tools, Streib and Poister believe that TQM is well on its way toward fuller acceptance in the municipal environment. Given these findings, it is likely that county officials have also developed an interest in TQM.

Even though we can assume that county government officials are experimenting with TQM, we do not know how great an impact TQM will have on traditional county-management processes. To some extent, the rush to TQM might be a result of the entire government revitalization movement, supported by authors such as David Osborne and Ted Gaebler (1992) and by Vice President Al Gore’s National Performance Review (1993), rather than of a genuine embrace of valuable management tool. If this is true, then TQM might remain in use for a long time, but it would not likely leave a substantial legacy.

One major reason for questioning the value of TQM for county applications is the ongoing debate over how to define the customers of publicly provided services or programs. Some scholars have argued that it is undemocratic to focus on the needs of those who use a service rather than those taxpayers and citizens who really pay for it (Swiss 1992). Who are the customers of a county sheriff, for example? Customers may be easy for production-based industries to identify, but it could be inconsistent with the public purposes of government agencies, “which demand attention not only to doing things right (the goal of TQM) but to do the right things” (Robert Denhardt 1993, 73-74). At the very least, the need to effectively define a valid customer is a major challenge to any public organization that intends to use TQM (West, Berman, and Milakovich 1993).

Even if conceptual problems concerning the definition of customers can be overcome, additional questions remain about how far to go in pursuing a TQM system. For example, TQM stresses the importance of management processes, as opposed to individual performance. “Quality is achieved when workers . . . cooperate with each other, not compete, and rely on customer feedback as the best measure of whether the system is working effectively” (Hyde 1996-91, 4). If one accepts the logic of this argument, then the next step is the abolition of indi-
vidual performance appraisals (James Bowman 1994). Clearly, it is hard to imagine counties taking such a step at any point in the near future.

TQM should, at the very least, promote an enhanced appreciation for citizens as customers (however defined), teamwork, quality, empowerment, and doing the job right the first time. Such developments would fall short of trumpeting a new era of TQM, but they might well produce some positive benefits. Interest in TQM is great enough, however, that a number of counties might move toward full-fledged TQM systems, and the outcomes of these efforts would be more difficult to predict. The fragmented nature of county governance would seem to represent added hindrance for the successful development of any comprehensive management system, and the unique characteristics of TQM are likely to create some formidable challenges.

CONCLUSION

This chapter presented an agenda for strengthening county-government management. These recommendations are not meant to imply that county government management is a failure or that county officials and other interested parties are not doing an adequate job. The central point of the agenda is that individual effort, even if diligent and sincere, will not have an across-the-board impact on the quality of county management. Counties will always possess talented individuals who transform individual county processes or extraordinary individuals who direct entire counties to a high level of management skill. Unfortunately, however, major changes will not come to county government as a whole without cooperative efforts. County governments will not achieve managerial excellence in a vacuum.

Above all, county leaders must realize that they are in a startling period of change and that they will need fresh approaches to solving the many problems confronting counties. Elected leaders must strive to understand the complexities of county governance, and appointed administrators must become more involved in policy making. Although there will never be a complete substitute for effective political leadership, administrators must look for ways to bridge the gaps that often develop between political and administrative processes. In many cases, leaders will have to become the architects of new decision-making systems that provide elected officials with the amount and quality of information needed to deal with multifaceted problems.

However, county leaders should not let the pursuit of management excellence turn them into management (tool) junkies. The road to management excellence is not paved with best-sellers. Management tools are important, but they must be under the control of individuals who possess leadership abilities, or they will likely have minimal impact. Also, management tools will accomplish little
unless county employees are able to work together toward commonly defined and accepted goals and objectives.

Finally, progress toward improving county-management skills will require considerable outside support. Enlightened state leadership would be a good place to start. Also, universities and academic researchers could work closely with state governments and professional associations to provide county governments with important information and services. If counties are not able to develop and maintain an appropriate level of management skill, important segments of our population are likely to suffer. From the managerial perspective, the knowledge frontier of the American county from a managerial perspective is much too important to ignore as the twenty-first century approaches.