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# WHAT IS MANAGERIAL MEDIOCRITY?

## Definition, Prevalence, and Negative Impact (Part 1)

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study examines the extent and impact of mediocrity in management. Mediocrity among public managers is defined as having only a modest commitment to contemporary values and practices of public administration. Based on a national survey of senior managers in city governments with populations over 50,000, this study finds that in about 41% of jurisdictions most managers have only a mediocre commitment to contemporary values and practices. Managerial mediocrity is shown to have strong, negative impacts on workplace productivity and on citizen trust in government. This first of two articles concludes with practical tips for assessing mediocrity in the workplace. The second article, which also is in this issue of PPMR, focuses on strategies for addressing managerial mediocrity.*

**KEYWORDS:** *excellence; leadership; local government; management; mediocrity; performance; public sector; quality*

Mediocrity in the workplace is a well-established, understudied, and increasingly important phenomenon. In recent years, managerial mediocrity has been named as a contributing or principal cause in many government failures, such as those involving the fight against terrorism, the *Columbia* space shuttle disaster, and environmental mismanagement (Fink, 2003; Parachini, 2003). In these instances, managerial mediocrity has been blamed for preventing organizations from making a timely assessment of their shortcomings and from developing proactive, creative, and necessary responses. Managerial mediocrity is a well-known but vexing problem. An aide to Lamar Alexander (former governor of Tennessee–R) said the governor’s high-level staff would get rid of the bad administrators and that they knew who the good ones were. The ones in the middle, they didn’t know about.<sup>1</sup> Regrettably, this aide is not alone. At present, very little scientific and practical knowledge exists about managerial mediocrity—how to define it, how common it is, and how to address it. In the face of such ignorance, it is not surprising that mediocrity often persists in organizations, and that government executives continue to face serious challenges identifying, avoid-

ing, and managing mediocre administrators—with detrimental impacts on performance, productivity, and citizen relations (Light, 1999; O'Neill, 2001; Volcker, 2003).

This article, the first of two on the topic of managerial mediocrity, defines mediocrity, relates mediocrity to commonly held notions, and attempts to measure the extent and impact of it in one area, namely, local governments with populations over 50,000. This article concludes with practical advice for assessing mediocrity in organizations. The second article, called "Solutions to the Problem of Managerial Mediocrity," in this issue, examines practical strategies for addressing it.

Increasing our knowledge of managerial mediocrity is not only an interesting challenge with practical significance, but it is also theoretically important. As a result of much scholarship and journalism during the last 10 to 20 years, "excellence" is now well defined, albeit not uniquely so. Accurate descriptions also exist of processes through which organizations attain high levels of performance (Borins, 1998; Bruce and Wyman, 1998; Golembiewski, 1999; Hellein and Bowman, 2002; Holzer and Callahan, 1998; Salamon, 2002). But although many organizations have improved their performance (the Internal Revenue Service, for example), it is readily observed that many other organizations continuously fail to attain standards of excellence, often despite their valiant and not-so-valiant efforts (Light, 1999; Nutt, 2002; West and Berman, 2003). Many organizations continue to perform in uninspiring ways, despite their own plans and efforts that tout the virtues of aspiring to excellence. Why does mediocre performance persist? Why are change strategies sometimes unsuccessful? We clearly need a better understanding of the barriers to performance improvement, and, in this regard, mediocre management is a plausible factor worth examining. Indeed, this research shows that managerial mediocrity is both widespread and associated with decreased performance.

### **The Concept of Managerial Mediocrity in the Public Sector**

There are many images of managerial mediocrity that include managers passing the buck, dodging responsibility, and artfully avoiding blame by hiding behind rules, policies, and perceived misunderstandings. Images also include managers exercising persistent misjudgment, such as those who implement the letter of the law but habitually misconstrue the big picture, thus causing problems and missed opportunities for the organization. In other instances, mediocre managers are seen as people-pleasers and compromisers with little task-orientation and few extraordinary accomplishments; they seldom take initiative, and they often drive outstanding employees away through their lack of support or understanding of outstanding performance. Finally, and curiously paradoxical given the above images, mediocre managers are often also seen as performing just well enough to be kept around, and occasionally even well enough to be promoted; they are exceedingly good at keeping their jobs, too (Ashworth, 2001; Cohen and Eimicke, 1995).<sup>2</sup>

These images of managerial mediocrity suggest that it has many manifestations, and that any definition of it must therefore be encompassing. In this study, managerial mediocrity is broadly defined as having only a *modest commitment to the contemporary values and practices of public administration*, such as having only a

modest commitment to serving the public interest, providing accountability, or achieving excellence, and doing so with only modest commitment to using contemporary practices.<sup>3</sup> This section discusses three key elements of this definition, namely, “mediocrity,” “commitment,” and “contemporary values and practices of public administration.”<sup>4</sup>

First, the term *mediocrity* is used here consistent with its general definition, as having only a modest commitment to excellence or as being of middling quality. If we imagine a scale of commitment to public administration values and principles, mediocrity occupies a *middle* range of commitment, omitting both the higher reaches that exemplify an abundance of commitment to values and practices of public administration (for example, strongly supporting the use of best practices) and the lower reaches that indicate poor or execrable levels of commitment (being indifferent or even opposing best practices). Mediocre commitment may involve, for example, managers who are somewhat interested in selected best practices, sometimes willing to undertake a limited application (perhaps when directed to do so), with just enough effort to ensure an occasionally positive result. This is a modest commitment indeed that shows the importance of moving beyond dichotomies in this discourse. This level of commitment is neither as good nor as bad as it could be; rather it is mediocre.<sup>5</sup>

Second, the term *commitment* here refers to an individual’s dedication or passion from which his or her actions follow.<sup>6</sup> Modest levels of commitment spur modest levels of action and knowledge,<sup>7</sup> and, hence, modest achievements. For example, a public manager who is only modestly committed (dedicated) to excellence might solicit some performance feedback but might not embrace open and constructive dialogue among stakeholders that could lead to new ideas for improvement or even process reengineering—an important outcome. Modest passions produce modest actions. Similarly, modest commitment to providing accountability may cause managers to provide financial disclosure that satisfies the letter of the law but not the spirit or intent. They may fail to seize the opportunity of providing information that could help stakeholders better evaluate the organization’s performance, such as by incorporating performance measures. As noted in the opening paragraph of this section, mediocre managers are often associated with missed opportunities and with hiding behind rules and regulations to justify their actions. Undoubtedly, if confronted about such lost opportunities, mediocre managers would counter that they were complying with what was requested of them—no more, no less (Benveniste, 1977).

The lack of strong commitment has an impact well beyond the realm of empirically observable actions. Mediocre managers may not be cognizant of lacunae, such as those above, until confronted by others. Lack of awareness (or a “blind spot”) occurs when mediocre commitment includes rather modest mental efforts that fall short of what is needed to fully grasp or appreciate the rationale or purpose of actions, such as reasons for soliciting feedback or providing disclosure. Mediocre managers may fail to adequately or correctly analyze the matters at hand. The resulting lack of information about interconnected phenomena, values, and end goals increases the likelihood of errors when developing and implementing management actions. This is also ubiquitously called “poor judgment,” which causes, among other things, those who

evaluate such actions to ponder or exclaim, "How the heck could (s)he have done that @#\*%!??"

By way of further elaboration, consider the following organizational "pathologies" that may result when managers with mediocre commitment are challenged by goals that are ill defined, long term, lacking a certain road map, and characterized by a high failure risk. Many public goals have these features.<sup>8</sup> One response by managers with mediocre commitments is to recast challenges in terms that are consistent with their preferences for modest levels of stamina, mental confusion, and uncertainty. High risk of failure, stress, and mental ambiguity is avoided by, for example, focusing on small pieces of the puzzle that are short term, achievable, well defined, and, preferably, accompanied by clear procedures for decision making. Stubborn and blind (e.g., inconsistent) rationalization is often used to support these choices and thereby keep managers in their "comfort zone." A second response is to hem and haw, thereby avoiding the "pain" of necessary analysis and decision making, while implementing actions that superiors state are necessary. Such managers often fail to stay on any chosen course; lacking internal conviction and analysis, they waffle in the face of even mild criticism. Note that both responses benefit mediocre managers by producing short-term results that, along with people-pleasing efforts, are aimed at satisfying their superiors in the short term. However, these adaptive responses also result in a loss of the big picture and accompanying efforts; dissatisfaction is likely to eventually set in as the accumulation of judgment errors and lack of real progress becomes all too evident (Caiden, 1991).<sup>9</sup>

It is also well worth considering that commitment is sometimes a matter not of personal choice or will, but of cognitive and physical limitations, or of poor habits that have become deeply ingrained and difficult to change.<sup>10</sup> The *Peter Principle* (Peter, 1969), which states that people are promoted to their highest level of incompetence, hints at innate limits as well. Three such limitations are people who are incapable of any creative idea or any analytical thought; those who lack the stamina to put in 60-, 70-, or 80-hour workweeks, regardless of other priorities that they may have; and those who are brilliant technicians but who lack interpersonal skills (Ashworth, 2001; Cohen and Eimicke, 1995; Northouse, 2004). For example, "people-pleasers" (around whom others feel comfortable) may be promoted to managerial ranks, but when such persons lack the necessary stamina or skills of analysis, they will not be able to perform adequately, no matter what level of effort they put forth or what assistance others may offer. To deny the reality that some people are best not promoted to managerial ranks is to exacerbate the prevalence and severity of managerial mediocrity in organizations. (This, in turn, also raises questions about screening for managerial mediocrity, a topic discussed later in this article.)

Third, the phrase *contemporary values and practices of public administration* in the earlier definition naturally invites specification. Managers who are assessing mediocrity in others will need to first identify those areas or activities under investigation. In this study, we develop a multidimensional construct of managerial commitment including (1) accountability, (2) excellence in performance, and (3) public participation. These areas are chosen because they reflect important contemporary public administration interests in research and practice, because they are core to modern notions

of professionalism (e.g., Berman, 1999; Windt et al., 1989), and because they reflect the authors' expertise and interests. Although no authoritative statement or list exists of specific contemporary values and practices in these areas, it is obvious that the literature reflects some consistency regarding such values and practices, such as is found in various codes of ethics, standards of conduct, and, sometimes, best practices, and also in public administration education programs that aim to impart such values and practices to their students. Thus, a reasonably consistent, though not unique, core set of value and practices can be identified.

Specifically, this study measures mediocrity by assessing managers' commitment to a reasonably encompassing range of values and practices that exemplify or are fairly typical of providing accountability, excellence in performance, and public participation. For example, commitment to excellence in performance can be assessed by the extent to which managers embrace professional standards; set challenging goals for themselves; are committed to improving their programs; know "best practices" in their line of work; and work diligently toward identifying and overcoming obstacles, including poor performance. Though other manifestations also exist of managerial commitment toward performance (and are included in the study: see Table 2), those listed here are fairly typical based on the literature. We similarly further define managerial commitment to accountability and public participation. In short, it is possible to study managerial commitment in empirically valid ways.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the present literature suggests a rather mixed, highly imprecise, and anecdotal accounting of managerial mediocrity in public administration managers today. On the one hand, many authors note outstanding public programs that produce excellent results (Borins, 1998, 2000; Frederickson, 1999; Goodsell, 1994). Others note many examples of efficiently run programs, excellence in customer service, and frequent innovation (Gaebler et al., 1999; Kearney, Feldman, & Scavo, 2000; Walters, 1998), which is further supported by the numerous award programs in public administration (e.g., Excellence in State and Local Awards Program). Others have shown that senior managers exhibit a high degree of professionalism (e.g., degree attainment), which suggests a striving toward high standards (e.g., Berman, 1999). On the other hand, a different stream of literature also suggests that mediocrity in government, though ill-measured, might be quite large (Benveniste, 1977; Caiden, 1991; Howard, 1994). For example, Paul Light (1999) states: "Despite a half century of unrelenting reform . . . the federal government is in danger of becoming a monument to managerial mediocrity." Gerald Gabris (1991, p. 205) writes: "[P]rofessional public administrators often downplay the fact that numerous public organizations are poorly run, employees stressed out, the level of managerial competence low, the degree of organizational stagnation high." Clearly, such evidence is highly imprecise and suggests the need for a more careful assessment of the level of managerial mediocrity today.

## Methods

A survey was mailed during 2002 to city managers and chief administrative officers (CAOs) in all 544 U.S. cities with populations over 50,000, and follow-up, in-depth

interviews were conducted in 2002 and 2003. Following a pilot survey, three rounds of mailings were sent, which provided 200 responses for a response rate of 36.7%. This response rate is consistent with that which is reported elsewhere in the literature (e.g., Hays and Kearney, 2001). Respondents are very familiar with workplace relations and their jurisdiction; on average, they have worked 20 years in government and 11 years within their present jurisdiction. Of these respondents, 94.7% state that they are familiar or very familiar with workplace relations in their jurisdiction. Consistent with current research practice (Berman and West, 2002), we refer to respondents as "senior managers," reflecting this diversity in their senior titles and positions.<sup>12</sup>

The demographic profile of respondents shows that 51.3% are female; 28.0% are younger than 45, 52.8% are between 45 and 54 years old, and 19.2% are over 54 years old. Most (67.2%) have an MA degree, 23.8% have a BA, 3.7% have a JD, and 3.2% have a Ph.D.; only three respondents had less than a BA. In addition, 50.5% report that their field of study of their highest degree is public administration (or related), 20.1% studied business, and the remaining majored in diverse fields such as education, economics, psychology, counseling, and sociology. Comparison of sample and population demographics suggests that the sample is broadly representative by form of government, size, and region. We also conducted in-depth telephone interviews among those indicating very high or very low levels of mediocrity. Written responses to open-ended survey questions provided further qualitative information.

To explore the possibility of sample bias, we examined whether addressees (city managers and CAOs) differ from other respondents in their assessment, but except in a few instances, we found that they do not significantly differ. We also examined whether the number of years in the jurisdiction affect respondents' assessments, as well as other respondents' characteristics discussed below. However, we conclude that the balance or mix of respondents does not affect the results. To examine the possibility of nonresponse bias (that is, that those who did not respond hold significantly different views from those who did respond), we conducted 44 phone interviews among a random sample of nonrespondents. We asked them a small sample of questions from the mail survey; comparing samples, we found no evidence of nonresponse bias. Finally, we also conducted over 20 in-depth interviews to follow up on matters under study. These qualitative responses are incorporated below.<sup>13</sup>

## Results

### HOW MUCH MANAGERIAL MEDIOCRITY IS THERE?

Managerial mediocrity has numerous manifestations. In our interviews, we asked respondents to provide us with their definition of mediocre management and to give examples in the areas of performance, accountability, and public participation. Table 1 shows that, collectively, these responses encompass many of the characteristics discussed earlier (see "The Concept of Managerial Mediocrity in the Public Sector"), though none of the respondents identifies all of these features, and most identify only one or two. The lack of vision and effort, risk-avoidance, and hiding behind rules are frequently mentioned as defining features of managerial mediocrity.

**Table 1. Defining Mediocrity: Respondents' Descriptions of Mediocre Management*****Not getting the big picture or purpose***

"Mediocre managers lack the big picture of the organization's goals and mission. They don't know what the organization is seeking to do, or they may not have sufficient knowledge of or commitment to the organization's mission."

"A mediocre manager is characterized by lack of vision of the big picture and too narrow a focus."

"We require public hearings for changes in laws, zoning, etc. Mediocre managers do not understand the purpose behind such requirements."

"Mediocre managers have limited ability to anticipate things."

***Hiding behind rules***

"Mediocre managers are often trying to cover themselves, building a paper trail, taking actions that ensure that they can't be accused of this or that wrongdoing."

"To me, mediocre managers hide behind accountability. They embrace accountability in the form of reporting activities and meeting minimum prescribed standards, but to excel you have to go beyond that which is expected. Mediocre managers seek safety in compliance activities. They do this to the detriment of public administration values."

***Missing opportunities, being rule-driven***

"The biggest definer of a mediocre manager is that they don't ask, 'Why not?' They ask, 'Why?' or say, 'This is the way we've always done it.' This leads to lost opportunities."

"Mediocre managers do not seek to go beyond that which is required (e.g., public hearings are required by the feds during the planning phase for public transportation initiatives). They are required to hold the hearing, but the intent of this requirement is to solicit and act on citizen feedback. Mediocre managers will hold the hearing, document that it was held, then fail to use the information gathered."

***Lack of initiative, risk-avoidance***

"Mediocre managers are caretakers. They are people who are good at following the standard operating procedures and at maintaining routines without ever improving the organization."

"'If it ain't broke, don't fix it' is the cliché that accurately describes the mediocre manager. To try something new requires taking risks; mediocre managers avoid risks and fear failure."

"Regarding ethics, it is not so much a problem with the ethics of the manager that makes them mediocre, it is their reaction to questionable behavior by their employees. They may go through the motions, but find reasons not to act even though the allegations warrant adverse action. Excellent managers would not brush such matters under the rug."

***Coasting on Appearances***

"Mediocre managers may belong to professional organizations, but fail to attend and learn from their meetings, may have professional friends but not seek and act on advice from their network, may subscribe to some professional journals but not read to keep abreast of current developments in their field."

***Justifications for failure***

"Mediocre managers often have an excuse for less than excellent performance: 'I never got the e-mail' or 'We can't do that without state approval.' While poor managers require close monitoring and are generally nonresponsive, mediocre managers will string you along. They will make promises but take a long time to act. They often delay on even simple things."

(continued)



**Table 1 (continued)*****Short-term orientation***

"Mediocre managers are motivated day-to-day with little long-term, strategic focus guiding their actions."

"Mediocre managers are interested in 'getting to Friday without getting fired.'"

***Uneven skills***

"Often mediocre managers are very good at one thing, and very weak at another."

"Mediocre managers often have gaps in their skill inventory."

***Brown nosing, people-pleasing***

"Some mediocre managers focus on becoming a top manager rather than on being a good manager. They schmooze and network and plan to ascend. Attaining and keeping the job takes priority over doing the job. Ascending the hierarchy and maintaining their authority is their primary concern. They often lack a focus on public service."

***Waffling***

"As a subordinate or supervisor of a mediocre manager, you are never quite sure where you stand, their decisions are often vague, their direction is unclear. They waffle, hemming and hawing, always looking for wiggle room because they don't want to act and later have to pay for a wrong decision."

***Micromanaging***

"Mediocre managers may micromanage subordinates. It makes subordinates feel that they are of no worth. It is management by negative reinforcement."

Our systematic approach does not focus on measuring the prevalence of these features, but rather on managers' commitment to an encompassing range of values and practices that are fairly typical of contemporary professional norms in providing accountability, excellence in performance, and public participation. These items are shown in Table 2, and were identified following a literature review. Table 2 shows, for example, that commitment to public participation is measured through such matters as seeking frequent input from community leaders on program goals, seeking citizen input, soliciting feedback from community leaders about performance, holding regular discussions with community leaders about problems, seeking citizen input in order to assess program performance, encouraging public participation processes in decision-making, and building community consensus. It is important to note that these items emphasize commitments and managerial behaviors that are associated with these commitments; they do not aim to assess municipal outcomes and community conditions, discussed later.

Table 2 also shows the result of a factor analysis, which is used to identify empirically similar groups of items. The table shows that these items can be grouped into three categories, which we label as commitment toward performance, accountability, and public participation.<sup>14</sup> Although other survey items were also considered, the factor analysis does not provide sufficient empirical support for including these items, and they are therefore not included in measures of managerial commitment. To further assess the consistency of the items within each index, the Cronbach alpha score

**Table 2. Factor Analysis of Items of Managerial Commitment**

	<i>Factor 1</i>	<i>Factor 2</i>	<i>Factor3</i>
<i>"In our city, most managers . . ."</i>			
<b>A. Commitment to Performance</b>			
Embrace professional standards	.837		
Are committed to improving effectiveness and efficiency	.826		
Exhibit a lot of energy and personal drive	.752		
Would rather overcome obstacles than accept them	.711		
Set high standards for their programs	.708		
Know nationally recognized "best practices"	.600		
<b>B. Commitment to Accountability</b>			
Conduct thorough program evaluations		.767	
Use performance measurement effectively in most programs		.745	
Provide detailed accountability about their programs		.675	
Regularly conduct performance audits		.667	
Receive training in ethics principles and practices		.622	
Ensure that all employees are aware of ethics standards and requirements		.552	
<b>C. Commitment to Public Participation</b>			
Seek frequent input from comm. leaders in defining progress goals			.826
Solicit feedback from community leaders about our perform.			.799
Have regular discussions with comm. leaders on city problems			.795
Seek citizen input to assess program performance			.787
Encourage public participation processes in decision making			.750
Are effective in building community consensus			.579
SSL (Sum of Squared Loadings)	4.084	3.836	3.236
Variation explained (%)	22.69	21.31	17.98
Total Variation explained (%)	22.69	44.00	61.97

*Note:* Factor Analysis with Varimax Rotation

of each set of items is determined, which is 0.87, 0.83, and 0.88 for performance, accountability, and public participation, respectively, all of which exceed customary minimum reliability levels of 0.7. Then, separate index measures are constructed of performance, accountability, and public participation. These measures, in turn, are combined into an aggregate construct of managerial commitment to modern public administration values and practices (with alpha value of 0.73).<sup>15</sup>

This study operationalizes the concept of "mediocre commitment" as, on average, only "somewhat agreeing" with the statements shown in Table 2 that constitute each index. Clearly, jurisdictions in which respondents on average only "somewhat agree" that most managers are committed to the values and practices reported in Table 2 cannot be regarded as exhibiting excellent or even high levels of managerial commitment. We also considered alternate approaches to operationalization, such as defining mediocre commitment as the percentage of respondents who rate at least half of the items on each index as "somewhat agree." This approach leads to quite similar find-

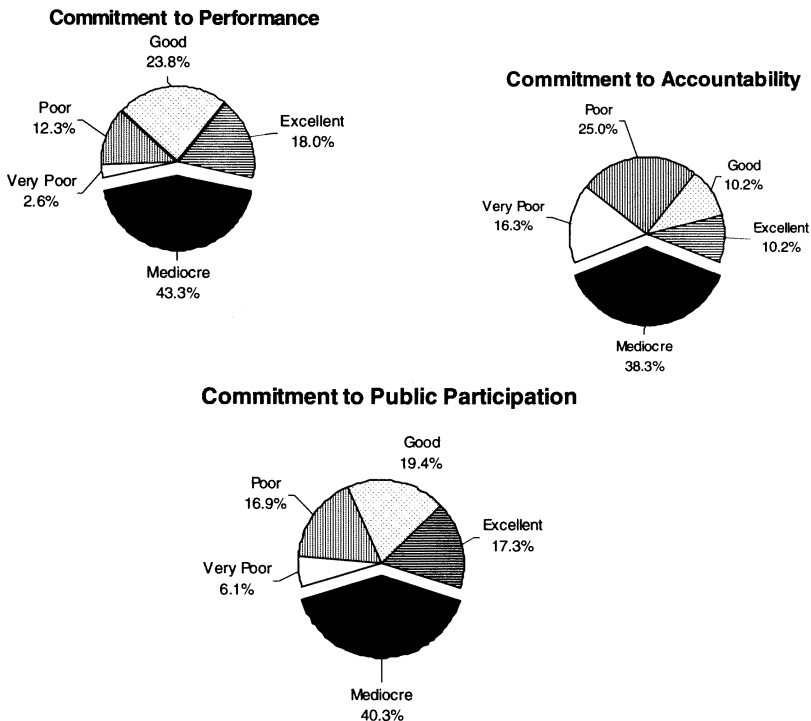
ings regarding the prevalence of mediocrity.<sup>16</sup> Note that neither definition in any way equates “mediocre” with an arithmetic “average” of any scale of commitment (or “peak” on a bell-shape curve); these are unrelated concepts.

Figure 1 shows key findings of managerial mediocrity in performance, accountability, and public participation. Among respondents, 43.3% identify the commitment of most managers in their jurisdiction to the items that measure performance as mediocre, as do 38.3% concerning accountability and 40.3% with regard to public participation. Thus, mediocrity in each of these areas is quite prevalent, and Figure 1 also shows that mediocrity is about as common as good/excellent managerial commitment in the areas of performance and public participation (41.8% and 36.7%, respectively). Though poor levels of commitment are somewhat less common in these areas (14.9% and 23.0%, respectively), poor commitment is quite common in the area of accountability, 41.3%. A possible explanation for this latter result is that items measuring commitment in accountability emphasize modern approaches to accountability rather than those that are more traditional. On average, across these three areas of commitment, we find that the commitment of most managers is mediocre in  $[(43.3 + 38.3 + 40.3)/3 =] 40.6\%$  of jurisdictions, commitment is good/excellent in 33.0% of jurisdictions, and poor/very poor in 26.4% of jurisdictions.

Mediocre commitment in one area, such as performance, does not necessarily imply mediocrity on other areas. For example, among cities in which most managers have a high commitment to performance, 67% are also said to have mediocre or poor commitment to accountability, and 44% are said to have mediocre or poor commitment toward public participation. The relationship among these three areas is positive but of modest strength: the Pearson correlation coefficients among pairs of these index variables do not exceed 0.6 (see note 15). Consistent with this, the aggregate construct of all items in Table 2 shows a somewhat higher level of mediocrity, 49.5%, than that reported above because respondents who rate most managers as having a high commitment in one area do not always rate them as being high in other areas, thus providing an overall average that is somewhat lower.<sup>17</sup>

Table 3 further specifies the nature of mediocrity in a rather interesting way. It analyzes the items of Table 2 among *only* those respondents who indicate that most managers in their city have mediocre commitment. Table 3 shows a pattern of most managers in these jurisdictions generally having appropriate professional orientations (for example, embracing professional standards and ensuring that employees are aware of ethics standards), including those that may be required (e.g., encouraging public participation), but more often than not, most managers fall short on actions and efforts (such as overcoming obstacles, having energy, and working with community leaders), and analytical skills (such as conducting program evaluations, performance measurement, knowing best practices). This finding supports the above framework, which highlights efforts and awareness (including analysis) as shortfalls. Also, jurisdictions vary greatly as to *which* items they score low on (on average, they disagree with 4.4 [that is, 24.4%] of the items in Table 3), giving further support to the notion that mediocrity has many manifestations that vary in different settings.

Indeed, what distinguishes jurisdictions in which most managers have only mediocre commitment from those in which most managers have good/excellent com-



**Figure 1. Managerial Commitment in Three Areas**

mitment is the near absence of almost *any* area of poor commitment (mean = 1.1, or only 6.1% of the items that are rated “disagree”), as well as an across-the-board raising of the level of commitment. For example, further analysis shows that among those who identify mediocre levels of commitment to performance, 53.6% state that most managers embrace professional standards, compared to 98.8% of those who also identify good or excellent levels of managerial commitment. Similarly, familiarity with best practices is found among 13.1% of jurisdictions in which most managers have a mediocre level of commitment, compared to 59.2% among those that have good or excellent levels of commitment. The findings concerning overcoming obstacles are 9.5% versus 61.7%; using performance measurement in most programs is 12.0% versus 82.5%; and effective community-based consensus building is 20.3% versus 75.0%. Thus, in cities in which most managers have good or excellent commitment, the vast majority also agree or strongly agree with *all* of the items shown in Table 3, unlike those jurisdictions in which most managers have only mediocre commitments. This, too, is an important study finding.

We also examined whether levels of managerial commitment vary by city size, form of government, or region, but we find no such relationship. Rather, correlates of managerial mediocrity are those that ordinarily affect organizational commitment. For example, in jurisdictions in which most managers have mediocre commitment

**Table 3. Three Dimensions of Managerial Mediocrity**

**Responses among jurisdictions in which the commitment of most managers is rated as mediocre, only.**

*"In our city, most managers . . . "*<sup>1</sup>

	<i>Strongly agree/ agree</i>	<i>Somewhat agree</i>	<i>Disagree<sup>2</sup></i>
<b>A. Mediocrity in Performance</b>			
Embrace professional standards	53.6%	46.4%	0.0 %
Are committed to improving effectiveness and efficiency	38.1	59.5	2.4
Set high standards for their programs	29.8	66.7	3.6
Exhibit a lot of energy and personal drive	22.6	71.4	6.0
Know nationally recognized "best practices"	13.1	46.4	40.5
Would rather overcome obstacles than accept them	9.5	58.3	32.2
<b>B. Mediocrity in Accountability</b>			
Receive training in ethics principles and practices	56.0	30.7	13.3
Ensure that all employees are aware of ethics standards and requirements	40.0	53.3	6.7
Conduct performance audits regularly	36.0	26.7	37.3
Provide detailed accountability about their programs	32.0	46.7	21.3
Conduct thorough program evaluations	14.7	52.0	33.3
Use performance measurement effectively in most of programs	12.0	58.7	29.4
<b>C. Mediocrity in Public Participation</b>			
Encourage public participation processes in decision making	48.1	39.2	12.7
Have regular discussions with community leaders on city problems	38.0	46.8	15.2
Seek citizen input to assess program performance	31.6	46.8	21.6
Seek frequent input from community leaders in defining program goals	22.8	58.2	19.0
Are effective in building community consensus	20.3	57.0	22.8
Solicit feedback from community leaders about our performance	17.7	62.0	20.3
1. Cronbach alpha scores of index variables are 0.87 (organizational performance), 0.88 (accountability), and 0.83 (public participation).			
2. Includes: "don't know," "disagree somewhat," "disagree," "strongly disagree" categories.			

(using the aggregate construct), 25.5% of respondents strongly agree that "people are strongly supported to put forth their best effort," compared to 9.3% in jurisdictions in which most managers are said to have poor or very poor commitment to modern public administration values and practices, and 64.8% in jurisdictions in which such commitment is good or excellent. Similarly, statements such as "people just act busy, rather than doing meaningful work," "people pay a high price for their mistakes around here" (a measure of fear), or "managers spend a lot of time shuffling papers" are also associated with levels of commitment. These findings are consistent with many other studies showing that support, goal-oriented behavior, and the absence of fear are as-

sociated with the use and success of modern management strategies (e.g., West and Berman, 1997).

### THE IMPACT OF MANAGERIAL COMMITMENT

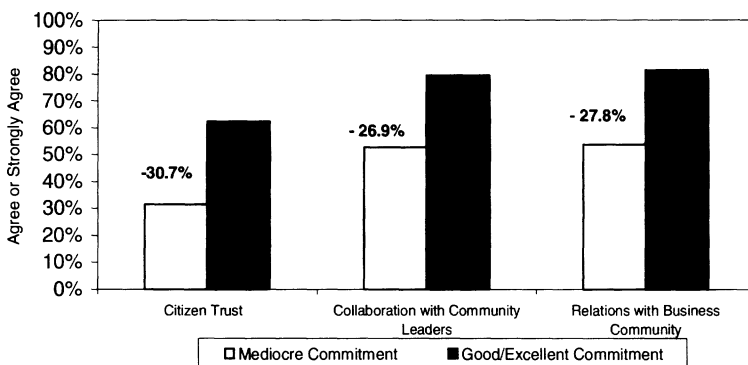
Mediocrity often is criticized, but hitherto very little systematic effort has gone into measuring its varied impacts. Our study provides some initial evidence concerning the impact of managerial mediocrity on community conditions, such as citizen trust, and also workplace conditions and productivity.

It is easy to hypothesize how mediocre management commitment can have negative impacts on communities. For example, the lack of commitment to high standards and collaborative decision making in many departments can lead to suboptimal program outcomes that are decried by those excluded from the process. This can result in low community trust in government, which could be exacerbated by inadequate accountability. There are many other ways in which such negative outcomes can come about, too. Figure 2 shows that mediocrity among most managers is significantly associated with lower citizen trust ("citizen trust in our local government is high"), collaboration with community leaders ("collaboration with community leaders is good"), and business relations ("relations with the business community are positive"). Specifically, among respondents who report that in their jurisdiction most managers have good or excellent levels of commitment (based on the aggregate construct of commitment to modern public administration values and practices), 62.3% agree or strongly agree that citizen trust in their city is high, compared with only 31.6% of respondents who agree or strongly agree that most managers in their jurisdictions have only mediocre levels of commitment. This drop of 30.7% in citizen trust is almost half (49.3%) of the trust level found in jurisdictions with high or excellent levels of managerial commitment. Thus, the odds of finding high levels of citizen trust in cities with managerial mediocrity are not very good. The respective results for community collaboration are 79.6% and 52.7%, and for business relations 81.5% and 53.7%. These differences are statistically significant.<sup>18</sup>

The pathway from managerial mediocrity to these outcomes is complex but by no means obscure. For example, the data show that most managers with mediocre commitment are less likely to seek citizen input, which, in turn, is associated with lower citizen trust ( $\text{tau-c} = .263, p < .01$ ). Seeking citizen input is, in turn, related to setting challenging goals, ( $\text{tau-c} = .317, p < .01$ ), which is associated with having a great deal of energy and personal drive ( $\text{tau-c} = .519, p < .01$ ). This latter point is also made in the following interview:

Mediocre managers tend to be very insular regarding public participation. They seldom go into neighborhoods, interact with community and business leaders, join the Rotary Club, etc. Excellent managers will seek out opportunities to interact with the public (via neighborhood groups, business groups, civic groups), but mediocre managers see such activities as a chore. They can't bring themselves to cultivate these community relationships.

It is obvious that the lack of such ties becomes a critical liability when jurisdictions face crucial events and circumstances that tax community confidence in



**Figure 2. Impact of Mediocre Managerial Commitment on Community**

them, and such ties are then key to addressing important concerns.<sup>19</sup> Interviewees also tell stories of mediocre managers impairing community relations by over-promising results, not following through, or insufficiently attending to the needs of citizens or businesses, hence, creating problems of low credibility or trust.<sup>20</sup>

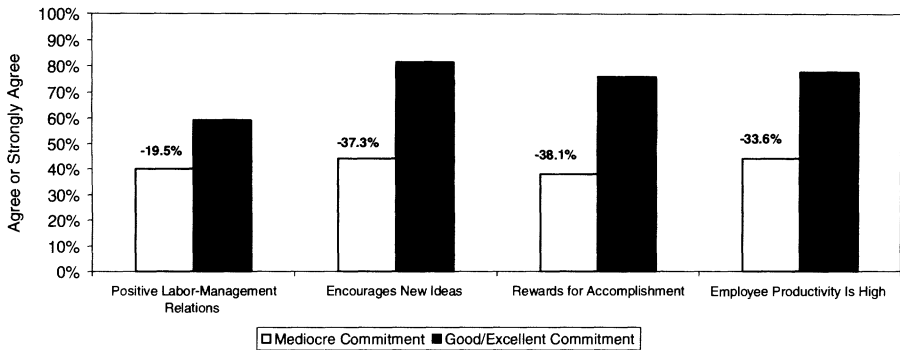
Figure 3 shows the impact of mediocrity on selected aspects of the workplace. In jurisdictions in which managers have good or excellent commitment to modern public administration values and practices, 77.8% agree or strongly agree that “employee productivity is high” compared to only 44.1% among respondents in jurisdictions in which most managers only have mediocre levels of commitment. Similarly, 81.5% also agree or strongly agree that their “organizational culture encourages creativity and new ideas,” compared to 44.2% who state that most managers in their jurisdictions have mediocre commitment, and rewards for accomplishment are much more likely to be available when most managers have a good or excellent commitment to public administration values and practices (76.0% versus 37.9%). The odds of finding a productive work environment where managerial commitment is mediocre is less than fifty-fifty. There are many ways in which managerial mediocrity leads to workplace problems, as reflected in the following comments from interviewees:

This mediocre manager almost always conducted performance appraisals of employees, but almost never provided useful or constructive feedback that would help employees develop their skills or improve their performance. She knew what needed to be done procedurally, but did not do so appropriately to improve employee and organizational performance.

Mediocre managers lack the ability to recognize the talents of their staff and to use those talents for the benefit of the organization and its clients. They do not give their staff enough latitude to use their abilities in a way that gets them excited about their job.

Figure 3 also shows that managerial mediocrity has a negative impact on labor-management relations. One interview provided the following assessment:

Mediocre managers sometimes have an uneasy relationship with unions best characterized as peaceful coexistence. They may tend to see unions as an adversary



**Figure 3. Impact of Mediocre Managerial Commitment on Work Life**

rather than an ally and likely be uncomfortable interacting with union leaders, keep them at arm's length, and distance themselves from the "other" side. Excellent managers often see the union as an ally that could campaign for pro fire-service candidates, something that fire chiefs cannot do. Excellent managers would establish constructive and collaborative relationships with unions and use them for the benefit of the fire service and the public in general.

This assessment shows that "excellent" managers are more likely to try to create opportunities for positive outcomes, which are insufficiently identified or pursued by managers with a mediocre commitment.

In sum, managerial mediocrity is associated with sizable declines in the prevalence of favorable community relations and workplace conditions.

### Conclusion and Discussion

This study examines mediocrity with regard to managers' commitment to modern public administration values and practices. It finds that the commitment of most municipal managers is mediocre in 41% of jurisdictions. In these jurisdictions, most managers are found to have appropriate professional orientations, but managers fall short in (1) effort and enthusiasm, and (2) specific professional knowledge and analytical skills, such as having knowledge of performance measurement or of the best practices in their fields. By contrast, most managers in cities with higher levels of commitment do not have these shortfalls. This study also finds that mediocre managerial commitment has significant, negative impacts. Cities with high levels of managerial mediocrity report a level of citizen trust that is about half that found in cities with higher levels of managerial commitment (62.3% versus 31.6%), and employee productivity that is about 40 % less than that found in jurisdictions with high levels of management commitment (77.8% versus 44.1%). This article does not discuss strategies for addressing managerial mediocrity, which is the focus of the second article.

A crucial, practical problem is assessing (identifying) mediocre commitment before it leads to mediocre results. This is an important, unresolved issue in hiring and



promotion, for example. It is naïve to think that mediocrity can be identified through interviews alone. As suggested by this research, mediocre managers usually are well aware of professional standards and practices, and they are often able to talk persuasively about them. The quality of their “talk” is apt to be indistinguishable from their high-performing and well-motivated counterparts, and sometimes even better, due to the extent that their careers have depended on such selling. Moreover, mediocrity often is not very apparent during probationary periods, and the short-term results of mediocre managers often are nearly identical to those of high-performing managers: both will produce short-term successes, demonstrate “good people skills” by pleasing superiors and colleagues (and avoiding short-term employee problems), and provide reasonable justifications for actions. Generally, problems of mediocre managers become evident only in the midterm, when their results begin to disappoint, and their justifications for mediocrity or failure become less convincing.

The need for diagnosing mediocrity in existing and aspiring managers is large, but most interviewers were unable to identify strategies for diagnosing mediocrity. A few interviewees did provide somewhat general responses such as the following:

It is hard to predict who is going to be mediocre. The best way is to query those who have worked with them in the past. People in this community are often recycled from the city to the county or from one city to another, so it is necessary to tap into the right network in an applicant’s former workplace to discover his/her true strengths and weaknesses.

and

My greatest success is identifying talented people, giving them resources, and getting out of the way. Mediocre managers lack what I look for—energy, passion, and willingness to respond to my inquiries as well as those of other stakeholders. I piece these things together to distinguish excellent from mediocre managers.

Going beyond such general statements, we propose the following untested strategies for diagnosing mediocrity among managers and those aspiring to be managers. Mediocre managers, and those who aspire to be managers, are unlikely to score high on all of the following items, because mediocrity has many manifestations. Concerns regarding even a few of the following bulleted questions should be ample reason to proceed with caution:

- Is there a pattern of a lack of truly exceptional accomplishment? People who are strongly committed usually have some high accomplishments and distinctions, and those who are mediocre will have mediocre records. Interviewers need to validate claims because mediocre managers are apt to oversell their accomplishments, and accomplished persons are sometimes deficient in selling themselves.
- Is there a pattern of inadequately implementing new performance and productivity improvements in their workplace? All workplaces need to improve. The lack of a pattern of improvement efforts and successes may indicate a lack of risk-taking, initiative, or ability to conceptualize (that is, reducing abstract concepts to meaningful and successful practice), as well as lack of commitment to either the organization or professional practice.
- Is there a focus on the trivial, rules, or details, rather than on developing efforts that

respond to big goals? Mediocre managers often are too narrowly focused and lack understanding of the role of the organization's goals in their effort. The lack of broader awareness causes judgment lapses that affect program decisions in their areas.

- Is this a people-pleaser? People need to get along, but also to accomplish. Getting to like someone, but not knowing much about the person's goals, skills, or past record despite interviews, should raise some warning flags, as do evasive responses to such inquiries. A likely reason for not talking about substance is the lack of adequate substance.
- Is there a pattern of not being greatly committed to professional and personal self-improvement? Are there any obvious skill gaps that are inconsistent with previous or currently held positions? People who are highly committed usually have a strong interest in acquiring or improving their skills and abilities. Uneven skills suggest either a disinterest or an inability to master critical tools of the field, either of which bode poorly for the future. As Stephen Covey (1989) has long noted, a habit of successful people is that they sharpen their saw.
- Is there unreasonable defensiveness when confronted with criticism, such as a flood of justifications that are focused on processes or conditions, rather than goals? Is there too much willingness to waffle and accommodate, even on important principles? Both suggest a lack of strong goal-orientation. The former also suggests a lack of flexibility, which can be a source of rubbing too many people the wrong way, creating alienation or even active opposition, whereas the latter may indicate poor judgment and a tendency to compromise too readily.
- Does this person fail to be a role model of excellence in at least one area, not relating to people skills? Mediocre managers are often well-liked as people, but they are seldom seen as role models in even a few narrowly defined substantive or professional areas.

It is important to note that the diagnosis of mediocrity often requires identifying a pattern of facts that are *missing*, rather than present. Interviewers must know what facts they are looking for; there is no place for blind empiricism that only relies on the facts as presented. Interviewers need to search for what is absent, rather than only that which is present. They will need to formulate as many specific questions as are needed in the above areas in order to obtain the relevant information or ascertain that it is missing. The above bulleted items can serve as a useful checklist.

The challenge of diagnosis extends to interviewees (job-seekers) as well, especially when they are unfamiliar with the organization with which they are interviewing. As this research shows, most jurisdictions do not exhibit managerial excellence, about which so much has been studied and written. But it is difficult for job applicants to get a handle on how committed managers, and hence their organizations, are. The truth about managerial commitment is often unknown to outsiders; managers and organizations do not advertise their mediocrity. Often this is among the best kept secrets, especially to job applicants.

We propose two strategies. First, networking has always been key to learning about job openings and being hired. People who hire often feel less risk with people who are somehow known to them, either directly or indirectly, through recommendations of others in whom they have confidence. Networking matters, and it can also provide job applicants with valuable information about the commitment of organizations. In most communities, there are organizations and departments with fabulous reputations, those that are so-so, and others that are to be avoided at any cost ("a snake pit"). People who are part of the network often possess such information and can be asked. Second, during the interview, it never hurts to comment on how important the work of

the unit is and then ask whether others recognize it for providing such service. The resulting information, however imperfect, can be used to improve the odds of making good decisions. Specifically, the lack of positive things should certainly be taken as a warning signal that may indicate mediocrity. Some organizations also create and publish their performance scorecards, and some of these reports may have matters relating to management.

Mediocrity is clearly a pervasive phenomenon that has many negative consequences. This research contributes to greater awareness about this problem and the need to move beyond good/bad, high/low, excellent/poor, and other dichotomies that do a disservice to improvement efforts. Only by better defining it and naming it can we hope to develop strategies to better deal with it. Indeed, too many senior managers in city government seem willing to settle for the T-shirt inscribed motto: "We're number two, why try harder?" The second article on this subject discusses strategies to address managerial mediocrity.

## Notes

1. Interview with Dorothy Olshfski and Bob Cunningham, Nashville, TN, summer 1985.  
2. Other examples of managerial mediocrity are found in many jokes about government and also in the popular *Dilbert* cartoon, a reminder that mediocrity is amply present in the private sector as well.

3. Although mediocrity is typically considered problematic, individual mediocrity is not always a negative: in some positions, employees who just do their jobs—no more, no less—may be all that managers want or need. Yet, mediocrity among managers (the focus of this study) and employees in critical technical and professional positions often is problematic, especially in fluid or demanding environments, because it causes a lack of responsiveness and effectiveness (Abramson and Gardner, 2002).

4. A reviewer noted, "I can think of committed managers who lack sufficient skill," and vice versa. In this study, commitment to contemporary public administration values and practices is defined as including the commitment to acquire and practice skills, as well as being committed to the organization and its causes. It follows that "committed managers who lack skill" are in some way not fully committed to public administration values and practices, and our analysis shows that such managers are at heightened risk of being classified as mediocre (see text discussion associated with Table 2).

5. It is obvious that these ranges cannot be solely defined by the idiosyncratic preferences of individuals, but rather that they must be grounded in objective, professional, or theoretical standards. To allow the former is to allow for relativism of the most absurd kind, such as evaluating low- and high-performing managers by different standards. Though objective, professional, or theoretical standards often are ill defined in practice today, this is not a problem with the concept of mediocrity per se. The example in the text paragraph shows that, despite some ambiguity, meaningful distinctions are made.

6. Note that this study measures commitment toward public administration values and practices, not other phenomena such as "organizational commitment," which typically addresses such matters as workers' loyalty to, identification with, and obligations toward employers (Moon, 2000; Liou and Nyhan, 1994; Testa, 2001). Nor do we seek to identify the most important motivations of public managers, which are sometimes compared with private sector managers (Cho and Lee, 2001; Flynn and Tannenbaum, 1993; Perry and Porter, 1983; Rainey, 1983; Rainey et al., 1983).

7. Commitment should not be confused with energy, which is necessary to put dedication into actions. The statement in the text is true only for people with average levels of energy. The problem of low stamina is discussed further.

8. For example, efforts to ensure global security, improving impoverished communities, or environmental management. It can be argued that not all goals are of this nature, but many are. They require high commitment, for example, in-depth analysis, and the stamina to provide whatever efforts are needed to ensure final success.

9. Of course, mediocre managers may have superiors who are also mediocre. Another response is that managers may rise to the challenge and increase their level of commitment. This, however, is not a pathology and is thus not discussed here.

10. See note 6 for the distinction between energy and commitment.

11. The theorem of the interchangeability of indicators states that if several different indicators all represent, to some degree, the same concept, then any combination of indicators behaves in much the same way if the concept is real and could be directly observed. Thus, any specific set of indicators needs only be valid with regard to those that are included; they need not be exhaustive of all items, or shown in any way to be the "best" of such sets.

12. Respondents are very senior indeed and include city managers and chief administrative officers (26.2%), assistant city managers (22.0%), and human resource directors (or respondents with similar titles, 19.9%). Almost all of the remaining respondents have such titles as manager of employee development, director of budget, director of administrative services, city clerk, director of organizational effectiveness, and so on.

13. Reviewers also raised the possibility of bias stemming from many items being stated in the positive, thereby increasing the uniformity of responses. Analysis of respondents' completed surveys shows very few uniform responses, hence eliminating concerns of necessary correlation among variables in the study. Some survey items were stated in the negative (e.g., "employee morale is low"), which might have further mitigated such problems. The results are clearly caveated, however, for any possible bias in this regard.

14. The Factor Analysis shown uses a Varimax rotation with the customary extraction criterion that eigenvalues exceed 1.0. The analysis satisfies customary criteria with KMO = 0.887, Bartlett's test of Sphericity: chi-square = 1903.7 (df = 153,  $p < .01$ ), and the cumulative explained variation of 61.97% (exceeding 60%). All factor loadings in Table 1 exceed the customary level of .55.

15. The following table shows the Pearson correlation coefficients among these three index variables:

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Commitment to performance (1)	—		
Commitment to accountability (2)	.572	—	
Commitment to public participation (3)	.423	.464	—

All associations are statistically significant at the 1% level.

16. On a Likert scale where 1 = strongly agree and 7 = strongly disagree, categories shown in Figure 1 are defined according the following ranges: Excellent, 1.00–1.99; Strong, 2.00–2.50; Mediocre 2.51–3.50; Poor, 3.51–4.50; and Very Poor 4.51–7.00. Obviously, redefining these ranges changes the estimate of mediocrity, but most reasonable re-definitions yield estimates within about 10% of those in the text. The alternate definition yields estimates of managerial mediocrity in performance, accountability, and participation of, respectively, 39.6%, 28.1%, and 33.7%, or about 5–10% lower than those reported in the text-reported results, but again supporting the prevalence of mediocrity.

17. Respectively, the results of the aggregate measure are Excellent: 10.9%, Strong: 17.2%, Mediocre: 49.5%, Poor: 17.7%, and Very Poor: 4.7%.

18. These differences are significant at the 1% level. The respective tau-c test statistics are .341 (trust), .343 (collaboration), and .366 (business) for the items in Figure 2, and .266 (labor relations), .427 (new ideas), .376 (rewards for accomplishment), and .383 (employee productivity) for the items in Figure 3 (discussed further).

19. One reviewer states: "I do not think the author(s) really engages the causality question. . . . couldn't it be that the excellent managers prefer excellent work settings and thereby avoid communities with low levels of trust?" This excellent point does not negate our argument that managerial mediocrity lowers citizen trust, but rather raises the possibility of lower citizen

trust also causing managerial mediocrity. This matter is examined in further detail in our second paper in this issue, which includes a causal model of this and other relationships. It does not find empirical support for this "reverse" impact.

20. For example, "Before I arrived here the voters had just approved a capital project bond. Unfortunately, mediocre managers oversold the benefits resulting from promised construction projects. I devoted a lot of resources and time for the better part of a year to convey to the community what could reasonably be expected, but the unfulfilled promises led to the community reaction that 'if they lied to us then, why should we believe them now.' We had to work hard over many months to rebuild lost credibility."

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