Rethinking Federal Management Reform

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Proposals for reform have dotted the federal management landscape in the United States for more than 50 years. Yet the results of these efforts have frequently failed to produce lasting results. The public management field’s prescriptions for reform have become too formulaic and have largely ignored lessons from the mediocre results that have been seen from many previous efforts. In her new book, Federal Management Reform in a World of Contradictions, renowned public administration scholar Beryl A. Radin reveals what may lie behind the failure of so many of these efforts at government management reform.

The book examines three basic sets of contradictions between the strategies of the reformers and the reality of the US federal system: contradictions in the shared powers structure, contradictions in values, and contradictions between politics and administration. Too often the prescriptions for reform have tried to directly apply techniques from the private sector or a parliamentary system that do not transfer well to the structure of the US federal system, to this country’s democratic traditions, or our complex political system. Radin then uses these contradictions to explore six types of reform efforts—contracting out, personnel policy, agency reorganization, budgeting, federalism policies and procedures, and performance management.

Carsten Greve, of Copenhagen Business School, calls Federal Management Reform in a World of Contradictions “essential reading for all who want to understand why public management reform does not always work as intended, but nevertheless continues to attract politicians’ and citizens’ attention. . . . A thoughtful and well-researched reminder of why politics and reform are bound together. This book places the public management reform agenda in its proper historical perspective.”

Mindful of the ineffectiveness of a “one-size-fits-all” approach, Radin does not propose a single path for reform, but calls instead for a truly honest assessment of past efforts as today’s reformers design a new conceptual and strategic roadmap for the future. Norma M. Riccucci, of Rutgers University, Newark, applauds the book, saying that it “challenges the way in which academics as well as practitioners have tackled the problems associated with public management reform. . . . [E]xtraordinarily insightful.”

Beryl A. Radin is a member of the faculty at the Georgetown Public Policy Institute at Georgetown University. In 2009 she received the H. George Frederickson Award for Lifetime Achievement and Continuous Contributions to Public Management Research from the Public Management Research Association. She is the author of Challenging the Performance Movement: Accountability, Complexity, and Democratic Values and Beyond Machiavelli: Policy Analysis Comes of Age.

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