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Keeping public officials accountable through dialogue: resolving the accountability paradox

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Keeping Public Officials Accountable through Dialogue: Resolving the Accountability Paradox

How can public officials be held accountable, and yet avoid the paradoxes and pathologies of the current mechanisms of accountability? The answer, claims Harmon (1995), is dialogue. But what exactly is dialogue, and how is it created? More importantly, how can dialogue ensure accountability? To address these questions, I begin with a brief description of dialogue and its basic features, distinguishing it from other forms of communication. An example illustrates how dialogue occurs in actual practice. Not only does dialogue demonstrate the intelligent manage-ment of contradictory motives and forces, it also supports Harmon's claim that it can resolve the accountability paradox and avoid the atrophy of personal responsibility and political authority. I suggest that dialogue's advantage outweighs its cost as a mechanism of accountability under a particular set of conditions: when public officials confront "wicked problems" that defy definition and solution, and when traditional problem-solving methods have failed, thus preventing any one group from imposing its definition of the problem or its solutions on others.

The accountability of public officials in a democratic society is a topic of long-standing interest (Wilson 1887). Broadly conceived, accountability implies answerability. To be accountable is "to have to answer for one's actions or inaction" (Oakerson 1989, 114) and to be re-sponsible for their consequences (Burke 1986; Cooper 1990; Kearns 1996).

The search for ways to keep public officials account-able has led scholars to identify various mechanisms of accountability. For example, Simon, Thompson, and Smithburg (1991) distinguish between formal and infor-mal types of accountability. Formal mechanisms are based on judicial, legislative, and executive or hierarchical con-trols, whereas informal mechanisms derive from society's mores, its political and social philosophies, bureau phi-losophy and culture, as well as from bureau executives' and managers' professional norms and code of ethics (Simon, Thompson, and Smithburg 1991, 513–61).

Barbara Romzek and Melvin Dubnick (1987) create finer-grained distinctions among accountability mecha-nisms that are derived from two dimensions: the source of control (internal or external) and the degree of control (high or low) exerted over public agents. Bureaucratic account-ability (high internal control) derives from hierarchical ar-rangements that are based on supervision and organiza-tional directives. Legal accountability (high external con-trol) is ensured through contractual arrangements. Profes-sional accountability (low internal control) is based on deference to the expertise of one's peers or work group. Finally, political accountability (low external control) is established by responsiveness to elected officials, clien-tele or customers, and other agencies (Romzek and Dubnick 1987; Romzek 1998). Although there is agreement that accountability in government is necessary, there is little consensus on which mechanisms should prevail at any point in time. The result is "a web of multiple, overlapping ac-countability relationships" within which public officials must work (Romzek 1998, 197).

Recent directives on bureau strategic planning and bu-reau results, exemplified in the Government Performance Results Act of 1993 and the National Performance Review (Gore 1993), offer an alternative framework for classify-

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ing accountability mechanisms. Bureau executives and managers are required to plan their bureau's direction strategically and state specific goals they wish to pursue (direction-based accountability). They then specify the output and outcome measures that will be used to ascertain whether bureau results have been achieved (performance-based accountability). These newest additions build on earlier efforts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to ensure procedure-based accountability—the establishment of laws, rules, and regulations for the purpose of constraining and guiding behavior in the implementation of bureau direction.[1]

Taken together, these three mechanisms produce what I call the *administrative model of accountability*. In principle, it offers comprehensive coverage on all aspects of bureau activity. Direction-based accountability ensures that organizational goals and objectives are established in accordance with the aims of political authority and constituent interests. Performance-based accountability requires the specification of output and outcomes in order to measure results and link them to goals that have been set, in accordance with the norms of management practice. And procedure-based accountability specifies the laws and rules of conduct in order to ensure high standards in the execution of bureau activity—specifically, how a bureau manages its human and material resources equitably and fairly in the implementation of it goals and objectives.

Despite its endorsement in the public management literature (Bozeman 1993; Jones and Thompson 1999; Brudney, O'Toole, and Rainey 2000), the administrative model of accountability has its critics. Michael Harmon's *Responsibility as Paradox: A Critique of Rational Discourse on Government* (1995) offers a particularly trenchant critique that centers on the model's behavioral controls and its legal/technical mode of rationality. He maintains that current societal trends (such as reinvention), which demand more and more accountability of public officials through the issuance of laws, edicts, and rules to control behavior, will "invariably fail," as other reform movements of the past have done. They will be unable to achieve their intended results—"the satisfaction of public wants and the orderly and efficient attainment of authoritative ends" (6). The failure, he believes, derives from our inability to regard reform "as the intelligent management of the contradictory motives and forces that constitute political and organizational life" (3).

The concept of responsibility is central to our ability to deal with contradictory motives and forces, according to Harmon. He contends that we must understand its paradoxical character. Responsibility connotes multiple meanings—both agency (that people are authors of and personally responsible for their actions), as well as accountability (that people are answerable to higher authority for their actions) and obligation (that moral action is determined by sources external to the agent who set standards and principles) (6). Keeping paradoxical aspects of responsibility in a "creative tension with one another" is the ideal. Lasting reform must address the problem of responsibility in all of its varied meanings.

Harmon maintains that the rationalist discourse on government presents a one-sided perspective on public officials' responsibility.[2] It neglects the idea of agency and public officials' personal responsibility in favor of accountability and obligation. The neglect of agency—or the pretense that it does not exist—has produced paradoxes, and these, in turn, have created the predictable pathologies summarized in table 1.

Table 1 Harmon's Accountability Paradox: Unresolved Paradoxes and the Pathologies They Generate

Paradox of Obligation: If public servants are free to choose, but at the same time are obliged to act only as authorities choose for them, then, for all practical purposes, they are not free. Alternatively, if public servants are free to choose, then their actions may violate obligations to authority, making their exercise of free choice irresponsible.

   Pathologies Generated:

   Bureaucratic Opportunism: The sacrifice of principles to do what is expedient and accommodating to self-interest.

   Reification of Obligations and Authority: The unreflexive use of principles to produce decisions that are compelled by principles rather than freely made.

Paradox of Agency: If individuals acknowledge personal authorship, as expressed through their own exercise of moral agency, then they deny their ultimate answerability to others. On the other hand, if they assert ultimate answerability to others, they deny their own moral agency.

   Pathologies Generated:

   Buck Passing: The declaration of one's innocence by denying personal authorship or sufficient authority and resources to achieve an institution's goals.

   Scapegoating: Blaming an individual in order to shield an institution's complicity and to protect its members' illusion of their collective innocence.

   Atrophy of Individual Moral Agency: The assertion of moral innocence by claiming victim status and thus discouraging the exercise of personal authorship and responsibility.

   Avoidance of Individual Responsibility: The relaxation of standards to perpetuate the illusion of victim innocence and the lack of confrontation and candor necessary for instilling a sense of personal answerability.

Paradox of Accountability: If public servants are solely accountable the achievement of purposes mandated by political authority, then as instruments of that authority they hold no personal responsibility for the products of their actions. If, however, public servants participate in determining public purposes, then their accountability to higher authority is undermined.

   Pathologies Generated:

   Atrophy of Personal Responsibility: Denying public servants the responsibility to establish public purposes prevents them from accepting the consequences of their actions and acknowledging the moral consequences of their manipulative control of others in the interests of "effective management."

   Atrophy of Political Authority: Granting public servants the responsibility to establish public purposes makes public servants answerable only to themselves and enables them to covertly manipulate political processes that determine public purposes.

How do public servants avoid these pathologies and maintain the "creative tension" among agency, obligation, and accountability? Although Harmon proffers no specific advice, he does provide some broad guidance: "[P]athologies may be managed if accountability is construed chiefly as a process of dialogue" (196). Not only is the dialogue to be conducted with fellow professionals and elected officials, but it is to be expanded "beyond organizational boundaries to take fuller account of political knowledge and citizen practices" (197). But what exactly is dialogue, and how is it created? How can it be used to deal with the contradictory forces of our political and organizational life? Most importantly, how can it ensure accountability?

To address these questions, I begin with a brief description of dialogue and its basic features, distinguishing it from other forms of communication. An example illustrates how dialogue occurs in actual practice. It occurs in Minnesota and centers on a future vision for the state's K–12 public schools. Not only does the dialogue demonstrate the intelligent management of contradictory motives and forces, it also support's Harmon's claim that dialogue can resolve the accountability paradox and avoid the atrophy of personal responsibility and political authority. Yet dialogue comes with risks and challenges, not the least of which are the new roles and skills required of public officials. I suggest that dialogue's advantages outweigh its cost as a mechanism of accountability under a particular set of conditions: when public officials confront "wicked problems" (Roberts 2001a) that defy definition and solution, and when traditional problem-solving methods have failed, thus preventing any one group from imposing its definition of the problem or its solutions on others. Dialogue can be successful in a complex, pluralistic society (Bohman 1996; Drysek 2000), but its usage depends on courageous public officials who are willing to absorb its risks in return for the enormous potential it holds.

Dialogue

Dialogue is a "special kind of talk" (Dixon 1996, 24). According to one of its more renowned practitioners, physicist David Bohm, the word "dialogue" comes from the Greek *dialogos*: *Logos* means "the word" or the meaning of the word, and *dia* means "through" (Bohm 1985, 1990). This derivation suggests the image of "a stream of meaning flowing among us and through us and between us—a flow of meaning in the whole group, out of which will emerge some new understanding, something creative" (Bohm 1992, 16). Martin Buber (1970) captures the essence of dialogue well in his classic work *I and Thou*. In the *I–Thou* relationship, each person opens up to the concerns of the other. Both parties reach beyond the limited confines of the self to eventually say "you and me" rather than "you or me." In that process, neither party selectively tunes out the other or seeks to rebut ideas with which it disagrees. Both listen and engage each other fully, internalizing the views of the other in order to enhance their mutual understanding. It is in this sense that dialogue is "a process of successful relationship building" (Yankelovich 1999, 15).

Daniel Yankelovich (1999, 41–46) outlines dialogue's unique requirements. During a dialogue, all participants treat one another as equals, even though there may be status differences among them outside the dialogue. They refrain from exerting coercive influences over one another— direct or indirect—in order to maintain their equality and build some mutual respect and trust. They listen and respond empathically to one another, trying to understand what others think and feel, particularly those with whom they disagree. They surface deep-rooted assumptions, their own and others, without challenging or reacting to them judgmentally and defensively. Dialogue, then, is a process of mutual understanding that emerges when participants treat each other with equality, not coercion, and when they listen empathically to one another's concerns in order to probe their fundamental assumptions and world views.

The centrality and importance of dialogue has been obscured by the many terms used to describe it. It is considered to be a fundamental aspect of "collaboration," "stakeholder collaboration," and "collaborative leadership" (Gray 1989; Huxham 1996; Roberts and Bradley 1991; Chrislip and Larson 1994). It is at the heart of what has been called "citizen empowerment," "civic engagement," "citizen/community governance," and "public deliberation" (Fishkin 1991; Mathews 1999; Box 1998; Bohman 1996; Drysek 2000). Other terms such as "participation," "public participation," and "citizen participation" (McLagan and Nel 1995; King, Feltey, and Susel 1998; Thomas 1995) attempt to capture its essence, but they should not be confused with references to public or citizen involvement in the 1960s and 1970s. These earlier efforts to open up access to government decision making through hearings, citizen advisory councils, citizen panels, and public surveys did not rely on interactive communication (Crosby, Kelly, and Schaefer 1986; Kathlene and Martin 1991): They were formal, one-way communications that did not rely on dialogue or the cocreation of meaning.

Dialogue differs from other forms of communication. To help us understand these differences, Yankelovich (1999) contrasts dialogue with debate and discussion (38–41). Debate is about winning and proving the other side wrong. Parties have a combative relationship. Each listens to the other only to find weaknesses in the other's argument. Each proclaims his assumptions as truth and the assumptions of others as flawed. Each criticizes the

other's position and defends his own. The point is to convince others there is a "right" answer and that you have it. In contrast to debate, participants in a dialogue work toward mutual understanding. They listen to find strength and value in one another's position. They reexamine their own and others' assumptions and positions. They acknowledge they can learn from each other to improve thinking on both sides. Through their co-learning, they evolve a sense of trust and a shared identity, such that transformations in views, perspectives, and actions have been known to occur (Roberts 2001b, 2002). Discussion, like debate and argument, also lacks the three central elements of dialogue. When one or more are absent (equality without coercion, empathic listening, and probing of assumptions), we have discussion or some other form of talk, but we do not have dialogue (Yankelovich 1999, 41).

Dialogue also differs from deliberation, a word that is often used interchangeably. In deliberation, one carefully weighs the reasons for and against a proposal or course of action, with a view to decision (Oxford 1971, 159). Bohman (1996) captures this distinction when he defines deliberation as "dialogue with a particular goal" (57). The goal is to use deliberation to make informed and reasoned decisions about ways "to solve social problems and to overcome political conflicts" (240). Additionally, participants in deliberation are challenged "to justify their decisions and opinions by appealing to common interests or by arguing in terms of reasons that 'all could accept' in public debate" (5). As Bohman summarizes, deliberation is "the process of forming a public reason—one that everyone in the deliberative process finds acceptable" (25), and it is "public to the extent that it is a joint social activity involving all citizens" (17). Dialogue, in contrast, "opens up space for deliberation" (61) so that public reasoning can take place. If dialogue achieves its purpose, then a deeper connection and shared identity emerges among the participants and informs their relationship. If deliberation achieves its purpose, then participants have been able to reason together publicly, weighing the costs and benefits of various policy options in order to inform their choices and decisions.

Case Study of Minnesota Dialogue on Public Education

To explore the link between dialogue and accountability, we turn to a case involving public education in Minnesota. Governor Rudy Perpich was searching for a visionary proposal for K–12 education in the spring of 1985 (Roberts and King 1996).[2] He was eager to "mend some fences" after a bruising fight with educators during the 1985 legislative session. Perpich had wanted to give all students, based on their needs and interests, the opportunity to choose which public school they wanted to attend. He was espe-

cially concerned about options for poorer students whose parents could not afford to move into more affluent neighborhoods, where the "better" schools were located. He believed children from lower-income families deserved the same educational opportunities that others had. Most educators and their professional associations vigorously opposed his idea, warning of administrative and pedagogical chaos if schools were open to all students beyond their district boundaries.

Perpich's policy initiative went down in defeat. Educators had not liked his ideas for redesigning education, which gave students and parents public school choice. They lobbied hard against his proposal, taking their case to the public and to the legislature. The divisive legislative debate that ensued was unusual in a state known for consensual politics. Only one aspect of Perpich's new proposal passed—a postsecondary-enrollment option that allowed high school juniors and seniors to attend classes in postsecondary institutions and receive both high school and college credit.

After the legislative session, Perpich wanted to move beyond adversarial, interest group politics. He instructed Minnesota's commissioner of education, Ruth Randall, a person whom he had appointed because of her innovative ideas and well-known ability to collaborate, to convene a dialogue on public education (Randall 1987). The specific charge was to craft a visionary proposal for the future of K–12 education in Minnesota.

The commissioner launched the effort by inviting groups active in the legislative debate and "all interested parties in the state" to join the Governor's Discussion Group (GDG), which eventually comprised 61 participants. Despite the explicit ground rule that membership was open to all, there was initial disagreement about who had a "right" to attend the meetings. Some participants wanted only "official" representatives of organized groups, thereby excluding people who represented "just themselves." After some discussion, all interested individuals—whether they represented organized groups or not—took their place at the table, although it was never clear whether they "were attending as individuals or as organizational representatives." Everyone was to be on equal footing as they worked together on a vision for Minnesota education.

The GDG met regularly (at least monthly) and, by February 1987, had held a total of 22 meetings. The commissioner was responsible for chairing, facilitating, and staffing the meetings and had two people from the Department of Education to assist her. She also had the additional responsibility of constructing and mailing out the agenda for each meeting, for which she actively solicited items from the participants. At its first meeting, the GDG agreed to divide their substantive tasks into nine major topic areas. A planning model, which included group process procedures and technical guidelines for preparing a policy docu-

ment, was introduced later in order to facilitate a "more structured approach" to the work.

Despite these agreements, hostility and suspicion carried over from the legislative session. People were still wary of one another, remembering the angry outbursts and personal attacks that had characterized their recent interactions. But rather than return to the divisive politics of the past, the GDG agreed to move on an alternative path. At the commissioner's urging, members decided to avoid debate and instead search for a consensus on problem definitions. Solutions, they acknowledged, could be debated later. Central to consensus building would be the exploration of what participants referred to as the "givens" of Minnesota education—tacit assumptions that people carried with them when they used words such as "school," "teacher," and "student." Members also agreed that, in order to get to the fundamental problems of education, they had to put "everything on the table" for reexamination, even their most cherished ideas and views. Exploring different interpretations of the term visionary was just one aspect of this effort.

By questioning assumptions and sharing information about the existing condition of education from each of their perspectives, they started to build a more complete understanding of the challenges facing education in the twenty-first century. Instead of blaming one another for the ills of education, they began to explore the societal dynamics that had contributed to its current state. Different voices, especially those who had been less vocal during the legislative debates, helped in this regard. They expressed doubts that the previous positions, staked out by the adversaries, represented the complete picture of the problems or what needed to be done to correct them. Their openness enabled others to reconsider their entrenched positions and to see some value in what others had to say. Eventually, members came to understand that addressing the problems of education would require their combined efforts, not just their individual solutions.

As members focused on the problems of education, they also began to open up to one another as individuals and to inquire about one another's motivations for attending the GDG. Explanations were very personal and revealing, adding another dimension to the interactions. Participants became human to one another—more than just a position or a point of view—and they started to know and accept one another as individuals. Their language reflected this transition: Midway through the GDG process, former adversaries began to speak of the group in terms of "we" rather than "us" and "them." They described their efforts in terms of "building relationships" and "building trust." Previous opponents started to agree with speakers from the "opposition" and validated their points. Laughter and supportive statements replaced negative and hostile comments. People

acknowledged everyone's right to be at the table because all shared a common concern for education. Thinking about these changes, one member characterized his participation in the GDG as a "growth experience." There was learning on all sides: School people became more "flexible," and business people became "better informed of the magnitude and complexity of managing public education."

Participants also evolved some mutually accepted norms to govern their interactions. They preferred to work together collectively and resisted suggestions to split into subgroups. Whenever temporary subgroups were necessary to gather data or to prepare position papers, members from different perspectives volunteered to work together and report back to the larger group at the next meeting. These norms were occasionally violated, however, more from confusion over group process than any subgroup's attempt to control or manipulate the agenda. At the final meeting, for example, items were added to the proposal to accommodate one member, even though the group had closed the agenda item. This action took place during a particularly confusing time, when members were unclear which items had been accepted or deleted from the proposal to the governor. Another member was so angry about these last-minute changes that he threatened to withhold his signature from the document, but after some discussion, he agreed to sign it.

By December 1986, the GDG had completed its visionary proposal for state education, signed by all members of the group. With some modifications in February, it included a voluntary K–12 open-enrollment options program, the expansion of school choice to at-risk students, school-site management, and testing for student performance. Participants had mixed opinions as to whether the visionary proposal was really innovative and visionary. One respondent wrote, "To the extent that much of the material had been discussed in the 'idea stage' before, it was not particularly innovative. To the extent that much of it had not actually been tried in the state, it was innovative." Follow-up discussions clarified what many participants had seen as the real innovation—the dialogical process itself.

The commissioner noted that "this is the first time that the major education organizations, businesses, higher education and broad-based citizen organizations have agreed to a common agenda prior to any major legislative session. While at times frustrating, it was also satisfying to see that experts in the field of education could come from so many different polarized positions and reach a consensus on (a) visionary plan for education." Another participant described the GDG as "the only experience where small groups and large [have had] the opportunity to be heard and have their issues discussed openly. Otherwise, policies [are] determined solely by the groups that have the most political clout—and PAC money—in the legislative setting." Removed from the normally divisive and com-

bative politics of the legislative process, participants acknowledged the additional benefits of dialogue. They had the time to assess the merits of new ideas, determine who was interested in them, and ascertain whether agreements were possible. As one participant summarized, the dialogue "allowed people to get to know one another personally and learn about one another's positions in a non-threatening environment. It showed how people of good will can change attitudes and behaviors." Outsiders, apparently, agreed: One observer called the dialogue "the most important intervention into educational policy making in Minnesota."

The outcomes of the GDG were particularly noteworthy. The governor responded to the proposal by incorporating its basic features into his legislative package. Although one staff member reported on the governor's initial surprise that the proposal was not more visionary, Perpich nonetheless publicly commended the commissioner and the GDG participants for their hard work and hailed their efforts as an important contribution to Minnesota public education. The legislative session that followed was very different in tone and substance from the 1985 session. The very act of signing the visionary proposal had a dampening effect on interest group politics. No acrimonious debate among the educational interest groups occurred. No one from the GDG "broke ranks" and returned to "politics as usual." All participants remained committed to their vision for state education—so much so that legislators had difficulty finding anyone to testify *against* the governor's proposal during the hearings. Having worked out their differences and built a consensus on the proposal to the governor, members of the GDG saw no reason to criticize what they had had a hand in creating. Signing the document had created a new social contract that members considered themselves bound to support. By the end of the 1987 legislative session, the GDG's basic recommendations, championed by the governor, were enacted into law. By the end of the 1988 legislative session, Minnesota had passed the first public school choice program in the country, enabling all K–12 students to attend their public school of choice by 1990–91. A majority of the participants considered their initial proposal to be a direct link to the 1988 legislation. Said one participant, "the agreed-upon planks were very instrumental in greasing the skids for passage."

Dialogue and Accountability

The Minnesota dialogue on public education succeeded in achieving mutual understanding among the participants.[4] Although the GDG continued to disagree on particular educational issues, even up to its last meeting, it moved beyond members' differences to establish relationships based on mutuality and respect. Not everyone agreed on all substantive points—but for dialogue to occur, not everyone had to. Having established the existence of dialogue, we are now ready to examine Harmon's claim. To what extent did dialogue ensure accountability? Analysis begins with an examination of the traditional mechanisms of accountability that were reinforced during the dialogue.

Traditional Mechanisms of Accountability

There is clear evidence of bureaucratic or hierarchical accountability. As a political appointee, the commissioner of education was answerable to her supervisor, the governor. She constantly updated him on the GDG's progress and ultimately fulfilled his directive to craft a visionary proposal for K–12 public education, even though there was some difference of opinion as to how visionary the proposal was. She also was politically accountable to legislators, educational interest groups, and constituents. She and members of her department briefed legislators on the GDG's progress and kept them abreast of its ongoing developments. The "stakeholder audit" (Roberts and King 1989) that she conducted early in her administration enabled her to identify stakeholders on the issue of public school choice and educational reform. Not only were they invited to attend the GDG, but, using extensive media channels, she asked "all interested parties" in the state to join them at the table.

There is also evidence of professional accountability in the way the GDG was structured and run and the way participants conducted themselves through the process. GDG members developed their agenda collaboratively and modified it as interests and issues evolved. The staff set up meetings, prepared background materials, and recorded the minutes for each session. The commissioner served as the GDG's facilitator—a neutral servant of the group, not a champion of any particular solution or point of view. Her role was to ensure that all voices had a fair hearing, so that people could listen and learn from one another. In this capacity, she espoused values of inclusion, trust, collaboration, and participation, norms that were characteristic of her department's and the general Minnesota culture.

Her neutrality was tested on many occasions. Some participants, especially early on in the process, wanted her to take sides. They criticized her for not being proactive and helping them with their particular "cause." It was a tribute to her even-handedness that advocates of public school choice said she moved too slowly and sided too often with traditional educational groups, and the opponents of public school choice said she moved too quickly and was too closely aligned with the "change agents." Paradoxically, the fact that each group accused the commissioner of siding with the other is perhaps the best evidence of her fairness. Attempts to politicize the GDG's deliberations also challenged her skills. Various stakeholder groups initially attempted to work behind the

scenes to control the agenda and end-run the process. Some threatened to bolt the dialogical process and take the competing views into the legislative arena. With the governor's backing, the commissioner countered these efforts and convinced everyone to stay at the table and work together, not separately, for what they wanted.

Thus, both informal and formal mechanisms of accountability existed. The GDG maintained the norms, ethics, and mores of professional conduct, even during the most contentious moments. Formal accountability existed through executive and legislative oversight and interest group and citizen involvement. Only judicial accountability was not exercised. Satisfied with the process and its outcome, neither the participants nor the general public found it necessary to file lawsuits to protect their interests.

Dialogue's Added Value

The Minnesota dialogue on education was a public process, widely covered by the press at the local, state, and national levels (Roberts and King 1996). Representatives from the media attended meetings on a regular basis and, through their widespread coverage, kept public attention focused on the GDG's agenda and activities. With this exposure, the dialogue did not violate nor replace traditional mechanisms, but reinforced them by making traditional accountability mechanisms more transparent and visible.

Most importantly, the publicness of the dialogue made participants accountable to one another (Drysek 2000; Bohman 1996). They built relationships on mutual listening and learning. Once established, a return to adversarial politics was less attractive, as the two subsequent legislative sessions demonstrated. Members were reluctant to testify against the governor's legislative initiative, not only because of their unanimous support for the proposal to the governor, but because they did not want to reactivate competitive, interest group politics. They had come to understand the limitations of pursuing self-interests in dealing with complex questions such as the future of Minnesota public education. Their commitment to cocreate a future signaled there was merit in working together rather than operating independently and competitively. Thus, the social network they created, based on the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness, generated social capital for their future work together (Putnam 2000).

Dialogue also established a space for deliberation to occur (Bohman 1996). Toning down the rhetoric enabled participants to hear one another and refocused attention on educational issues, not just on personalities. Alternative solutions to educational problems were addressed without demonizing the opposition. Participants were able to get a fair hearing for their ideas and opinions before the group ultimately made its decisions about what to endorse for state education. Most importantly, through the press coverage, the GDG became a vehicle for public learning about education. Group members not only broadened their own understanding, they also helped the larger public to clarify its views and to come to terms with some highly charged and contentious issues. What began as poorly formed public opinion on public school choice eventually became public judgment (Yankelovich 1991) that strongly endorsed public school choice for Minnesota schools. The polls reflected this transition: When first queried in 1985, only 18 percent of Minnesotans knew what school choice was and endorsed it for all grade levels. By 1992, 76 percent of those surveyed favored public school choice (Roberts and King 1996, 189). As the GDG publicly reasoned and learned, so did the larger public.[5]

These examples illustrate, at least in the Minnesota case, how the accountability paradox was resolved. The governor opened up a public space for dialogue and deliberation. His decision to create the GDG, although risky considering his antagonistic relations with some educational groups, signaled a willingness to try an alternative to adversarial politics. The new forum he created invited participants to reason together publicly about educational issues and gave voice to those who had had trouble being heard above the din of legislative debates. Members understood they would not be the ultimate decision makers on educational policy, but they were fully aware of the important role they were asked to play. They rose to the occasion and assumed personal responsibility for helping to create a future vision for public education. They listened to one another's views, achieved mutual understanding, and collectively came to a decision that all could live with, even though some participants were not enthusiastic about some of its features. Moreover, they accepted the consequences of their decision and refused to undermine their unanimous agreement. Their public commitment to one another illustrates the benefits of an accountability system that joins personal agency and answerability to higher authority. Yet, the GDG offered even more.

The commissioner and the Department of Education members who staffed the GDG served as neutral servants to the group. They facilitated meetings and provided information, even expert opinion, when requested. In sharing responsibility for agenda creation and decision making, they relinquished what formally had been theirs to control. The principles for meeting management that they followed (Bentley 1994; Swartz 1994), although at times challenged, created a level playing field where all voices could be heard on an equal footing. Their obligation was not to control the group's outcomes; it was to be the protector of the group's process. They understood the GDG's proposal would be a product of dialogue and deliberation, not just a reflection of what they, as experts in the Department of Education, wanted. Obligation, combined with

accountability and personal agency, complete Harmon's triumvirate of responsibility. Taken together, they formed a system of responsibility that was stronger than the sum of its parts.

The Costs of Dialogue as a Mechanism of Accountability

Despite the apparent advantages of dialogue in the Minnesota case, it is important to acknowledge that dialogue comes with significant risks and challenges as a mechanism of accountability. Risk stems from several factors. Dialogue is transparent, calling everyone into account for their values, views, and behavior, especially when the press is reporting on participants' every move. There is nowhere to hide if things go wrong. Dialogue also can fail just as well as it can succeed, and there have been failures (Kaboolian 1999; Isaacs 1999). Public embarrassment can be career ending for public officials. Traditional expectations for leadership behavior also are violated. Leaders of a dialogue convene and facilitate a process, they do not take control and direct the outcomes. They become stewards of a democratic process rather than advocates of a particular point of view. Stewardship is not well understood or appreciated (Block 1993; Reich 1990), and it can prompt criticism from a number of quarters.

The commissioner, for example, was criticized for "not being decisive" and not knowing how to run "proper meetings." According to some, she did not exercise "control" over the meetings and appropriately use Robert's Rules of Order. Her insistence on consensus alienated those who were steeped in interest group politics and who expected to "win" over others rather than learn from them. Other public officials have had similar experiences. William Ruckelshaus, former head of the Environmental Protection Agency, was chided by the press and by the public for the agency-sponsored deliberations in Tacoma, Washington. One area resident accused him of copping out of his responsibilities (Scott 1990, 165), and another complained, "we elected people to run our government, we don't expect them to turn around and ask us to run it for them" (167). Said another, "these issues are very complex and the public is not sophisticated enough to make these decisions. This is not to say that the EPA doesn't have an obligation to inform the public, but information is one thing— defaulting on its legal mandate is another" (167).

Dialogue also can be time consuming and resource demanding. The GDG met monthly over an 18-month period for at least two hours per meeting, and it also held retreats and special sessions when the need arose. Besides the governor's, the commissioner's, and the participants' time, two departmental members staffed the sessions and other departmental personnel gathered documentation and provided expert opinion when the GDG called for it. These costs were similar to the requirements for other events. The commissioner, when serving as a local school district superintendent, had 101 staff members trained to conduct public meetings so that they could serve as conveners, presenters, and observers of the public (Roberts 1985). Roughly 30 people from a regional EPA office are reported to have worked full time for four months on the EPA case in Tacoma, Washington (Scott 1990, 169).[6]

Dialogue also can be challenging to employ. There are new leadership roles and new skills to learn (Chrislip and Larson 1994; Senge 1990). Care must be taken during the initial meetings to set expectations for a new way of being together and to reinforce the idea that everyone has a responsibility to make it work. Taking time to explain what dialogue is, how it is different from other means of communication, and why it is being used as an alternative mode of operating is important. People do not necessarily know how to listen, be self-reflective, or reason together. Their history of relating to one another as advocates in a win–lose political contest makes the transition to co-learner in dialogue frustratingly slow. People need to be realistic about the time commitments and the learning required. Public officials also should be ready to deal with those who continue to operate out of a political framework—and they will. Everyone needs to be reminded of their commitment to one another so that the entire group can monitor its own development. Changes in behavior do not come easily or quickly, and there are setbacks—they are to be expected (Isaacs 1999). Larger numbers of people involved in the dialogic process also test the management skills of even the most accomplished facilitator. Getting so many people involved is not a trivial undertaking. Fortunately, practitioners have been inventing new techniques for large groups, and the results have been very promising both nationally and internationally (Emery and Purser 1996; Weisbord 1992; Weisbord and Janoff 1995; Thomas 1995).[7]

When to Use Dialogue as a Mechanism of Accountability

The Minnesota dialogue on public education has enabled us to explore the finer points of dialogue and the extent to which it avoids the paradoxes and pathologies of traditional mechanisms of accountability. But, considering its risks and challenges, public officials would do well to ask whether it should be universally applied to all situations, or whether special circumstances warrant its usage. Although current research is far from definitive, dialogue appears to be a particularly useful mechanism of accountability when problems and solutions are contested and when traditional problem-solving methods have failed because no one group can impose its definition of the problem or its solutions on others. All of these conditions applied in the Minnesota case.

Finding a vision for Minnesota public education was a "wicked problem" (Churchman 1967; Roberts 2001a). As the initial GDG meetings revealed, neither the problems nor their solutions were clearly definable. Some participants described the problem as the schools' monopoly control over students and the schools' resistance to innovation and change. For them, school choice became the preferred solution. Others defined the problem as a lack of funding that prevented schools from delivering on their educational mission. They viewed increased school funding as the only option. The problem statement was dynamic and evolved as new aspects and constraints surfaced and as participants listened to and learned from one another. None of the participants had a complete picture of public education. Educators needed to hear from businesses, which were concerned about the quality of students' learning and how much money business was investing in remedial education. Change agents needed to appreciate the challenges of classroom teaching without the requisite materials and resources. And teachers needed to hear there were viable venues for learning besides traditional classroom instruction. Dialogue helped them to cross the jurisdictions that divided them—separate organizations, sectors, and disciplines—and allowed them to evolve a more complete picture of education as a whole. Only through their collective learning process were they eventually able to agree on a vision of education that all could support.

People also had to "fail into" dialogue (Roberts 2001a). In 1985, the governor failed to get his ambitious policy agenda through the legislature. Educational groups got a black eye for being resistant to change and innovation. The business community did not get the attention focused on their education proposals. And the legislature, unable to sort out competing interest group claims, deferred judgment on what to do, annoying a public that was expecting reform in education. Groups pressing for narrow, specialized interests had to learn that, in acting alone, they would not be able to get everything they wanted—and more importantly, that scarce resources would have to be devoted to blocking others from taking action rather than getting something done. Only when they recognized the futility of what John Gardner (1981) calls the "war of the parts against the whole" (19) were they able to break the impasse. Despite its risks and challenges, dialogue came to be viewed as preferable to adversarial politics, especially when there were few alternatives to deal with a wicked problem that required comprehensive and integrated treatment across both public and private sectors.

Conclusion

According to John Dryzek (2000), democratic theory has taken a decidedly "deliberative turn," and so, might we add, has democratic practice. The numbers of national and international dialogues (mutual understanding among participants) and deliberations (public reasoning and problem solving on policy issues in order to make choices and decisions) grow daily. Topics cover a range of issues from the environment, housing, and community development, to education, health care, and international relations (Saunders 1999; Susskind, McKearnan, and Thomas-Larmer 1999). The Minnesota dialogue on public education, as one example, has been the focal point of this analysis. It has served as a vehicle for exploring Harmon's (1995) claim that dialogue can resolve the accountability paradox and avoid the pathologies inherent in traditional mechanisms. Participants did build a system of responsibility based on personal agency, accountability to authority, and obligation to external principles and standards. Not only did their dialogue reinforce traditional accountability mechanisms by making them more transparent and visible, it created a space for participant learning and deliberation to occur. Thus, the social network they created, based on the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness, generated social capital for their future work together (Putnam 2000).

The GDG also became a vehicle for public learning about education. Thanks to the press coverage, the GDG dialogue not only broadened participants' understanding, but it also helped the larger public clarify its views. Public opinion gradually moved from poorly formed ideas about choice to strong endorsements of public school choice for Minnesota schools. Thus, the GDG became a vehicle to guide public reasoning and learning on a highly complex and contentious issue.

Yet, for all the questions the case answered, a host of others remain: Is dialogue always successful as a mechanism of accountability? Does it always lead to positive outcomes? If not, what are the conditions for its success or failure? Should it be used in all circumstances, or is it advisable to be selective in its application, given the complexities and costs involved? If dialogue is used selectively, who determines when and how it will be used? If it is to have widespread usage, what are the implications for other mechanisms of accountability and for the governance structure in which it is embedded? Judging by the growing interest and practice of dialogue, there will be ample opportunities to address these questions in the future. This is only the beginning of what promises to be an exciting avenue for public administration research and practice.

Notes

1. The term "procedure-based accountability" reflects an emphasis on controlling work processes rather than focusing on outputs and outcomes. Examples include laws and regulations on personnel hiring and firing, budgeting, and acquisition. See Gore (1993) for a critique of process controls as opposed to result-oriented controls.

2. See Harmon (1995), chapters 3 and 7, for a review.

3. The field study on the GDG was embedded within a larger five-year longitudinal study of policy entrepreneurship that was conducted 1983–88 (Roberts and King 1996). Data were collected from multiple sources, using various research methods: interviews, archival records, newspaper reports, field notes based on observations of the GDG, and written comments from a survey of the 61 GDG participants. The two field workers conducting this research were granted free access to all formal meetings and activities of the GDG (including one day-long retreat and three day-long meetings). They gathered additional information from GDG members through informal conversations, telephone calls, and follow-up interviews. Other scholars' research papers on the GDG and field notes from 19 interviews with GDG participants also were available.

4. I used Yankelovich's (1999) three indicators (equal participation, empathic listening, and questioning of assumptions) to establish the presence of dialogue. As an additional check, I used indicators recommended by other scholars: disciplined, collective thought processes (Isaacs 2001); arousal and regulation of positive affective states (Bradley 2001); and "conversational moves"—how participants changed their language and patterns of speech over time (Gergin, McNamee, and Barrett 2001). All indicators supported the presence of dialogue.

5. The presence of both dialogue and deliberation in this case should not be construed as a linear process—that is, first one occurs, and then the other. The two processes were interrelated and mutually reinforcing. Relationships based on mutual understanding developed as deliberations over substantive issues occurred, and reasoning over educational problems helped to create mutual relationships built on respect and trust. We can speculate that, in all likelihood, the coexistence of dialogue and deliberation was a factor in the success of both processes. At the same time, we know there are other occasions when there is dialogue without deliberation and deliberation without dialogue (Mathews 1999). Future research will have to unravel the subtle interplay between the two and the extent to which their presence or absence is a factor in the outcomes.

6. The costs of dialogue need to be put in perspective. Interest group politics and "adversarial legalism" (Kagan 1991; Kelman 1992)) also have their costs. The hidden costs of court battles in defense of stakeholder interests and the opportunity costs for not getting things done should be factored in as well.

7. Use of Internet technology to supplement face-to-face meetings also might be feasible, but experts are not sanguine about its potential for dialogue and do not recommend it as a substitute for face-to-face communications (Evans 2001).

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