

Towards A Multi-Actor Theory of Public Value Co-Creation

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Abstract

This essay suggests changes to the theory of public value and, in particular, the strategic triangle framework, in order to adapt it to an emerging world where policy makers and managers in the public, private, voluntary, and informal community sectors have to somehow separately and jointly create public value. One set of possible changes concerns what might be in the center of the strategic triangle beside the public manager. Additional suggestions are made concerning how multiple actors, levels, arenas and/or spheres of action, and logics might be accommodated. Finally, possibilities are outlined for how the strategic triangle might be adapted to complex policy fields in which there are multiple, often conflicting organizations, interests, and agendas. In other words, how might politics be more explicitly accommodated? The essay concludes with a number of research suggestions.

Introduction

Mark Moore's 1995 book *Creating Public Value* (CPV) and the strategic triangle framework have stimulated a substantial literature on the theory and practice of public value creation across many different countries and contexts. Moore's focus has mainly been on the role of public managers in creating public value and securing its authorization, legitimation and realization. Moore's managers are entrepreneurs with a "restless, value-seeking imagination" (Benington and Moore, 2011, p. 3) and intention, and clearly not the more passive, rule-bound, direction-following administrators of traditional public administration (Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg, 2014). They also operate within the framework of democratic processes and practices.

Moore's commitment to public value creation as a means to strengthen the democratic process is unequivocal, although some of his critics question that (Rhodes and Wanna, 2007). Others believe he is misguided in thinking that this approach can support democracy (Dahl and Soss, 2014), or else think he is hopelessly idealistic, at least in the US context, given the sharply divided public opinion on many issues, intensely partisan politics, the power of organized interests, and the many veto points built into governance arrangements ([Jacobs, 2014](#)). Moreover, one might argue, though we do not, that the approach might reinforce the technocratic state of mind of many public managers (Power, 1999).

Moore's normative approach is brought to life via the *strategic triangle*, which strongly encourages the public manager to "manage up" to the formal authorizing environment, "manage outward" to the public and other stakeholders, and "manage down" to make sure that the organization has the operational capacity to actually deliver public value. The approach is unquestionably a significant contribution to the theory and practice of public management. Unfortunately, while the framework is often discussed, there has been surprisingly little empirical research on its descriptive accuracy or effectiveness in practice ([Williams and Shearer, 2011](#); Bryson, Crosby and Bloomberg, 2015; Hartley, Alford, Knies and Douglas, this issue)

This essay addresses needed additions to the theory of public value and, in particular, the strategic triangle framework, in order to adapt it to an emerging world where policy makers and managers in the public, private, voluntary, and informal community sectors have to somehow separately *and* jointly create public value. Doing so is difficult, because the new world is a polycentric, multi-nodal, multi-sector, multi-level, multi-actor, multi-logic, multi-media, multi-practice place characterized by complexity, dynamism, uncertainty, and ambiguity in which a wide range of actors are engaged in public

value creation and do so in shifting configurations ([Rhodes, 1997](#); [Kettl, 2002](#)). Adaptations are necessary because the strategic triangle was initially targeted at individual managers typically at the top of single public organizational hierarchies. The new, more complex context thus prompts the question: *Specifically, how should the theory of public value creation be developed, and the strategic triangle adapted, to take account of these fundamental changes in the way public value is defined, produced and sustained, while maintaining a commitment to strengthening democracy?*

In answering this question we first emphasize what we believe Moore got right in his CPV conception: First, the strategic triangle has shown itself to be an easily understandable and useful heuristic guide to practical reasoning on the part of public or nonprofit managers ([Moore, 2000](#)), and perhaps to business managers as well ([Moore and Khagram, 2004](#)). It highlights the fact that all action to address public concerns requires an understanding of what public value might be in a given situation, authorization and legitimation to create it, and the capacity to produce it. We therefore should seek to maintain as much of that simplicity as possible in adapting Moore's CPV conception to a more complicated context with many strategic actors, organizational contexts and perceptions of public value in play.

Second, a major reason why the public value approach is useful and productive is because it underscores how entrepreneurial spirit, strategic action and leadership are key to promoting public value – again, in contrast to traditional theories of public administration, and in line with recent theories of management and leadership (e.g., [Goldsmith and Eggers](#); [Lane and Wallis, 2009](#)).

The traditional use of the strategic triangle has some shortcomings, however, when applied to the new, more complex context. First, it tends to be public manager-centered in a world where elected officials and actors from many other sectors are called upon to take the lead in, or otherwise help in, producing public value. Second, said differently, while it places public managers in a proactive and productive role, this tends to downplay the roles of other actors (e.g., elected officials, social entrepreneurs, community activists, and business leaders). Here we argue that a general theory of public value production must assume it is an open and empirical question what role different actors, often from different sectors, can and do play in the processes of value production. At the core of this general theory is the assumption that in democratic societies public value entrepreneurs, whoever they may be and in whatever sector they operate, face the same tasks of obtaining authorization and legitimation, building organizational capacity, and discerning, defining and creating public value.

Third, a general theory should also take account of the fact that public value entrepreneurship in multi-actor, multi-level settings often takes the form of co-production and inter-organizational collaboration within or across sectors (Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Pestoff, Osborne and Brandsen, 2006; Bovaird, 2007; Osborne, 2010; Pestoff, Brandsen and Verschuere, 2012; [Voorberg, Bekkers and Tummers, 2014](#); Bovaird, et al., 2015). In other words, different *kinds* of actors may join up in the center of the triangle in a shared effort to strategically lead and manage public value creation, and in doing so they refer to different authorizing environments, activate different organizational capacities, and typically differentially prioritize the values pursued by different audiences and publics. From this perspective, as they work towards negotiating a (reasonably) shared goal, they are also simultaneously working within *their own* strategic triangle. The result is a field – indeed, typically multiple, often competing fields (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011; Sandfort and Moulton, 2015) – composed of multiple actors, often at multiple levels. Each actor may rely on their *own* strategic triangle as a guide to practical reasoning, while also explicitly or implicitly making use of a *shared* strategic triangle as an action-oriented resource (or burden) that can help inform the efforts of the different actors to obtain power and influence in the co-produced, but often still contested processes of public value creation.

Fourth, the triangle is fairly silent on the kinds of practices necessary to produce public value. Moore in his 2013 book, *Recognizing Public Value*, places strategic management (informed by a proposed public value accounting scheme) in the center of the triangle (pp. 105, 110), but does not fully elaborate what that means in a multi-actor context. Engagement with the recent literatures on governance and meta-governance could further inform our understanding of the challenges facing those involved in the strategic management and leadership of public value production as well as of the tools and methods available to them in doing so ([Sørensen and Torfing, 2009](#); [Sancino, 2015](#)).

And finally, uncritical use of the triangle treats public value essentially as an output or outcome when in fact many important public values and practices – and perhaps especially democracy and democratic practices – are not just instrumental means, but are ends in and of themselves ([Pateman, 1976](#); Dahl and Soss, 2014). Beck, Jørgensen and Bozeman's (2007) inventory of public values, for example, indicates that many public values are procedural. More generally, Dewey (1937) argues that democracy is best viewed as a way of life. In a similar vein, Pateman (1976) asserts that civic engagement is as much about building citizenship as it is about producing better decisions.

A number of issues therefore need to be addressed in developing a general theory of public value production that take into account that multiple actors are involved; that role distributions,

including leadership roles, are highly dynamic from case to case; that co-production and inter-organizational collaboration are often involved; and that public value can be both an end and a means. These issues include at least the following questions:

- Who or what is in the center of the strategic triangle? As noted, Moore early on put the public manager (singular) there; more recently he has put strategic management there. But other possibilities might be considered as well.
- How can multiple actors, levels, arenas and/or spheres of action, and logics be accommodated within the strategic triangle?
- How can the strategic triangle be adapted to complex policy fields in which there are multiple, often conflicting organizations, interests, and agendas? In short, how may politics be more explicitly accommodated?

Who or what is in the center of the triangle?

Actors in addition to public managers and *practices* beyond strategic management may be at the center of the triangle, but so might be *arenas or spheres of action*; *public problems or challenges*; and *functions*. As noted above, actors (e.g., individuals, groups, organizations, and inter-organizational networks) from all sectors may act as (co)creators of public value. There are, of course, advantages and disadvantages to each choice in particular situations. In addition, the choices would depend on whether the purpose is descriptive or normative. If the purpose is descriptive, then any actor or actors relevant to the creation of public value might be placed in the middle. If the purpose is normative, as Moore's was, then a normatively preferred actor or actors might be placed in the middle. For example, those concerned with democracy would probably place elected officials, citizen organizations, or citizens in general in the center.

Placing *practices* at the center of an adapted triangle makes sense because practices are a fundamental building block of the social world ([Reckwitz, 2002](#)). For example, Bryson, Crosby and Bloomberg's (2015) attempt to generalize the strategic triangle to more complex environments via what they call the *public value governance triangle* (see Figure 1) places practices as the center. They highlight six general practices important in the creation of public value, including: policy analysis, design and evaluation; leadership; dialogue and deliberation; institutional and organizational design, including

designing and implementing cross-sector collaborations; formal and informal processes of democracy; and strategic management, including performance management regimes and models. Placing practices at the center of the triangle de-centers the public manager and highlights other actors and ways of creating public value. Their list of practices is not exhaustive and might more directly emphasize governance and meta-governance.

Insert Figure 1 About Here

Focusing on *arenas* draws more explicit attention to politics and strategizing, coalition building and democratic action, as well as to political manipulation (what Riker, 1986, calls *heresthetics*, and Huxham and Vangen, 2005, call *collaborative thuggery*), and how each of these might help or hinder public value creation (Crosby and Bryson, 2005; Sørensen and Torfing, 2007). Placing arenas in the center again de-centers the public manager and broadens the purview of the triangle.

Putting *public problems or challenges* in the center highlights the multiple possibilities for categories of entries in the points of the triangle and, indeed, problematizes the framing of the problem or issue placed in the center. Doing so can be helpful in especially complex situations, since it prompts actors to question their understandings, appreciations, values and commitments as they explore exactly what the problem or challenge might be and what might be done about it. The disadvantage is that who the key actors are, what practices they might pursue, and in what arenas may be obscured. That said, figuring out what the problem is can help clarify possible answers to these concerns.

Finally, *functions* can be central to the creation of public value. These functions might include, for example: public leadership broadly conceived; organizing effective actor engagement; discerning or defining what public value might mean; creating good ideas about how to create it; building a winning coalition; effectively implementing value-creating strategies; and building ongoing capacity for learning, strategic change, and democracy enhancement (Bryson, 2011, 39). These functions can be served by many different kinds of actors or by a network of actors.

In Table 1 we propose a brief example of how the key five concepts above mentioned can be operationalized in relation to the case of persons seeking asylum in Western Europe from the Middle East and Africa. The table serves as a heuristic device for discerning the many possibilities for using an expanded view of the strategic triangle as a way of approaching the issues caused by the million or more

migrants and refugees to Europe in 2015 (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34131911>; accessed 26 February 2016).

Insert Table 1 About Here

How to accommodate multiplicity of actors, levels, arenas, spheres and logics of action?

Moore (1995, 2013) and Bryson, Crosby and Bloomberg (2015) do not explicitly attend to *levels*, such as: the individual manager, the team or group, the organization, inter-organizational networks, or society. And while the latter authors locate their revised triangle in the broader environment, including the public sphere, they are relatively silent on how to enhance that sphere, other than by highlighting the formal and informal processes of democracy and Benington's definition of public value which includes what enhances the public sphere. Specifically, Benington (2011, p. 32) sees the public sphere as "a democratic space" that includes the "web of values, places, organizations, rules, knowledge, and other cultural resources held in common by people through their everyday commitments and behaviors, and held in trust by government and public institutions." It is "what provides a society with some sense of belonging, meaning, purpose and continuity, and which enables people to thrive and strive amid uncertainty" (43). He argues that the public is not given, but made, and has to be continuously created and constructed. He also believes that public value is necessarily contested.

Attending to levels is important because levels often are built into constitutions, legislation, regulations, and funding arrangements; and because of the long history of parsing social reality into levels in the social sciences and ordinary practical reasoning. We should therefore recognize that action to create public value thus takes place at multiple levels: individual, group, organizational, inter-organizational network, and community, regional, state or provincial, and national and international levels. But in an increasingly networked world it also makes sense to talk about multiple *arenas* or *spheres of action* (or inaction). Indeed, much of the dynamism in the public realm is due to the interactions across overlapping spheres (or social fields as systems; Fligstein and McAdam, 2011), not just separate tiers (Benington, 2001), since what occurs at different levels and in different arenas and spheres is often moving on different tracks, in different directions, and on varied time frames with often

complex, unpredictable and problematic consequences for other actors (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011; [Patton, 2010](#)).

Finally, a multi-actor approach to public value draws attention to the multiple *logics* in play as part of the reasoning characteristic of different sectors, roles and practices (Saz-Carranza and Longo 2012). Research on collaboration indicates that competing logics can make collaboration quite difficult (Bryson, Crosby and Stone, 2006, 2015). These logics might include the only partially overlapping logics of the market, business, government, nonprofit, media, and civil society sectors; as well as the more specific within-sector logics of funding, service delivery, regulation, enforcement, conflict management, and so on. Multiple logics may also refer to different epistemological paradigms of public administration (e.g. Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg, 2014; O'Flynn, 2007; Osborne, 2010) and to different kinds of democratic conceptions and practices (e.g. [Fung, 2006](#); Keane, 2011). Depending on the circumstances and context some set of these logics must be reasonably accommodated for effective collective action to proceed.

How to adapt the strategic triangle to complex policy fields?

Bryson, Crosby and Bloomberg's (2015) public value governance triangle attempts to adapt the strategic triangle to more complex multi-actor, multi-organizational, multi-sector contexts. They have kept the basic design of the triangle, but adapted the "points" to the new context. The legitimacy and authority box includes legitimate decision bodies in multiple sectors, broad stakeholder support, and support from citizens and other individuals. These are all aspects of governance, but are not themselves governance practices. Capabilities for creating public value also include those from multiple sectors. These authors also include capabilities for achieving procedural legitimacy and procedural justice, as well as procedural and substantive rationality, all of which are important public values (Page, et al., 2015). The public value box includes not just Moore's conception of public value, but those of Bozeman (2007), Bozeman and Johnson (2014), Meynhardt (2007), and Benington (2011). In this way the revised triangle addresses some of the concerns about Moore's own focus on public value (singular) and invites attention to conflicts and trade-offs as well as complementarities in public values (plural).

But one of the limitations of the public value governance triangle is the fact that *each* actor in the relevant policy field faces the challenges posed by his/her/its own strategic triangle. In other words,

in any given multi-actor situation there are multiple strategic triangles actually or potentially in play. When one realizes that fields also include multiple tiers and spheres, the result is triangles “all the way up, all the way out, and all the way down.” While an accurate rendition of a field of multiple actors engaged in pragmatic, situated reasoning and action, the implications for research can be daunting, a subject which we address in the next section.

Figure 2 proposes a new representation of the strategic triangle framework that complements and enriches the public value governance triangle. Figure 2 adapts the strategic triangle even more explicitly to the new, multi-actor, multi-sector, shared power world. Specifically, Figure 2 recognizes that public value creation has both analytical and action dimensions. The analytical dimension is characterized by multiple levels and categories of analysis. The action dimension draws attention to the multiple strategic triangles that are in play at the same time. The new figure is also intended as a guide to practical reasoning, not a formula or specific recipe. In terms of research, as a *framework* it is a guide to development of specific *models* for testing; in other words, it is not a framework to be tested, but is instead a guide to developing models for testing.

Insert Figure 2 about here

We suggest in Fig 2 that public value can be either “hegemonic or contested.” Sometimes there is general agreement in a social context about what counts as public value, while at other times there is conflict. In the latter case, public value creation may involve struggles with deep political differences between various stakeholders and challenging navigation through hardnosed conflicts.

At the center of the modified strategic triangle are the five elements we described earlier: actors, practices, arenas and spheres of (in)action, public problems or challenges, and functions. The triangle is then explicitly embedded in a circle representing democracy and democratic practices (not only representative, but also deliberative and participative). This move doesn’t alter the inclusion in the center of the triangle (as in the public value governance triangle) of the formal and informal processes of democracy as practices for addressing public value and public values concerns; instead, it is meant to draw attention to whether or not democracy is being strengthened in specific circumstances in which multiple strategic triangles are in play. The democratic circle in turn is situated in another bigger circle representing the public sphere and public values that would be part of a still bigger conceptual space, as

envisioned by Benington (2011). In this regard, note that the circle representing public values goes partly beyond the circle representing the public sphere, because creating public value can advance or enhance the public sphere.

Conclusion and a Research and Action Agenda

Mark Moore has made a major contribution to theory and especially to practice with his strategic triangle and framework for understanding public value creation. Our purpose in this essay has been to explore how best to adapt the virtues of Moore's contributions to take account of increasingly complex and sometimes wicked challenges (Head and Alford, 2016) involved in creating public value, while maintaining a commitment to democracy. We have suggested a number of possible additions and adaptations. Fulfilling the larger purpose, however, invokes a number of additional challenges for research and action. These include at least the following important questions for building a more general theory of public value creation:

How can Moore's approach be adapted to accommodate problems that go beyond the simple to complicated ones that Moore highlights in his texts to encompass truly complex or "wicked problems" (Rittel and Webber, 1973)? Part of the answer includes attending to the contributions complexity theory can make to informing public value creation (Bovaird, 2008; Klijn, 2008; Patton, 2010). This is the subject of the essay in this issue by Guerin, et al. More generally, the challenge involves taking a whole-systems approach to understanding and analysis, including: appropriately drawing system boundaries, understanding the parts and sub-parts of the system; and understanding their inter-relationships, and especially feedback relationships. Absent these kinds of understandings, chances are very high that problematic situations will be misunderstood and public concerns are more likely to be badly addressed or made worse (Senge, 2006; Patton, 2010; Scharmer, 2009). Other insights can be harvested from theories of network governance, that stress the role of interdependencies for multi-actor collaboration, and how meta-governance can stabilize and give direction to such networks (Agranoff and McGuire, 2003; Klijn and Koppenjan, 2004).

How best can the elements of an expanded strategic triangle and approach to public value creation be operationalized? Progress in theory, research, and practice will depend in part on the operationalization of the different categories of actors, processes, practices, arenas or spheres of action, and logics, along with the new elements of the "points" of the triangle relating to legitimacy and authority, capabilities, public value, and the public sphere. A first step is to work at joining the various

strands of the public value literature. Beyond that, researchers especially should ask how contributions from other disciplines and fields can be incorporated into a more general theory of public value creation (Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg, 2014, 2015).

What is the best way to map public value processes? Moore describes public managers as “explorers commissioned by society to search for public value” (Moore, 1995, 299). Explorers both need and create maps. Fortunately, due to the “visual turn” in organization studies and practice (Bell, Warren, and Schroder, 2013), there are increasing numbers of ways to visualize public value processes (e.g., [Alford and Yates, 2014](#); [Bryson, Ackermann, and Eden, 2014](#); [Richardson, Andersen and Lunes Reyes, 2015](#); [Cresswell, et al. 2015](#)). These approaches need to be studied further and their applicability to creating public value enhanced.

How can co-production processes be used to create public value? Co-production is an increasingly important topic for both research and practice ([Voorberg, Bekkers and Tummers, 2014](#)). Its importance for public value production is obviously significant, but understudied, including the implications of co-production for democracy and citizenship. On this issue Alford has highlighted that co-production calls for a “more intricate notion of citizenship—not only as voting, exercising rights and taking part in public deliberation, but also assisting in the production of public services” (1998, p. 135), whereas Bovaird et al. (2015) have pointed out how co-production implies a redistribution of power among professionals and citizens and recalls important issues related to accountability.

Practice needs to explore, and research needs to study, the conditions required for different but needed actors to:

- gain agreement on what public value is to be co-produced
- obtain authorization and legitimation, when there are often multiple and perhaps conflicting arenas
- develop needed capacity to co-produce public value. Capabilities are likely to be distributed and networked, but also involve significant gaps, divergent resourcing, and differing time frames.

Doing so is likely to require an understanding of the differences actors, levels, spheres, sectors and logics make.

What are, or should be, the processes involved in “calling a public into existence” (Dewey, 1987) that can move beyond the self-interests of those involved or affected as customers in a market, service recipients, or passive bystanders, and towards a recognition of their common interests as citizens in a polity? Public managers and public value entrepreneurs play a vital role in “calling a public into existence” by “doing informational and relational work that brings people together from different

perspectives in ways that allow them to appreciate one another's perspectives and potentially work together to address problems" (Feldman and Kkademian, 2007, p. 320). This is likely to require the creation of innovative public spaces, and safe but stretching "holding environments" (Heifetz and Linky, 2002), within which people and organizations with competing and conflicting interests can use "agonistic" pluralistic negotiation (Mouffe, 2013) to create coalitions with a common purpose (Benington, 2015). Answering this question can be helped by detailed ethnographic case studies of, and participatory action-research with, social movements, perhaps especially in post-conflict contexts.

It is also important to highlight the important role of politicians, political leadership and politics in public value production in a democratic society. More exploration is also needed of the role that political power plays in public value production and how politicians seek and gain authorization from citizens. In addition, special attention also needs to be paid to the role media and social media can play (Mergel, 2012). Both can offer advantages in terms of communication, explanation, framing, transparency, accountability, and legitimacy (and co-production). But also apparent are the challenges posed by media siloes, oversimplification, distraction from the important by the immediate or urgent, and 'gotcha' journalism.

How should conflicts over public value and public values be addressed? Addressing value conflicts is a classic policy and management challenge (Bozeman 2007; [Wagenaar 1999](#); Spicer 2009; Stone 2012;), yet knowledge about how multi-organizational collaborations handle them is scarce (van Gestel et al. 2008). An emerging, related literature has helpfully defined the dilemma of managing value conflicts, and identified eight mechanisms for managing them, drawn primarily from single case studies and illustrated with selective examples from different governments and time periods (Thacher and Rein 2004; Stewart 2006; van der Wal, de Graaf, and Lawton 2011; de Graaf, Huberts, and Smulders 2014). They include:

- Cycling: Alternately emphasizing different values that conflict at different points in time;
- Firewalls: Distributing responsibility for pursuing distinct competing values to different institutions or administrative units;
- Casuistry: Consulting past decisions about similar value conflicts, and crafting a customized response based on those examples;
- Hybridization: Sustaining distinct policies and practices that pursue competing values;
- Incrementalism: Softening or ameliorating value conflicts through a series of small adjustments to policy or practice;

- Trade-offs: Safeguarding one value at the expense of another;
- Bias: A specific type of trade-off that gives preference to values that are consistent with a dominant discourse or larger value set at the expense of other conflicting values – in keeping with the notion of a values hierarchy (Beck Jørgensen and Bozeman 2007);
- Escalation: Elevating questions about competing values to a higher administrative or legislative authority.

There are no doubt more mechanisms, including simple compromise (e.g., Oldenhof, Postma, and Putters, 2014).

What are the implications of all this for actors who aim to create public value? We have paid most attention to analytic dimensions. Analytic dimensions and scale may well be the same in particular circumstances, but they may not be. Analytic dimensions may show the limits of action, and action may reveal the limits of analysis.

In sum, we are optimists about extending Mark Moore's work to more complex contexts, and indeed have been inspired by his work. He is obviously a seasoned optimist committed to democracy, the common good, and the role that public managers may play in advancing the well-being of people. We would like to extend that optimism and commitment to the new environment that increasingly emphasizes the roles that many kinds of actors and many kinds of organizations can jointly play in defining and advancing public value. There is a great deal of work to be done, but the payoff lies in the possibility of making the world a far better place for all free people in democracies.

Figures

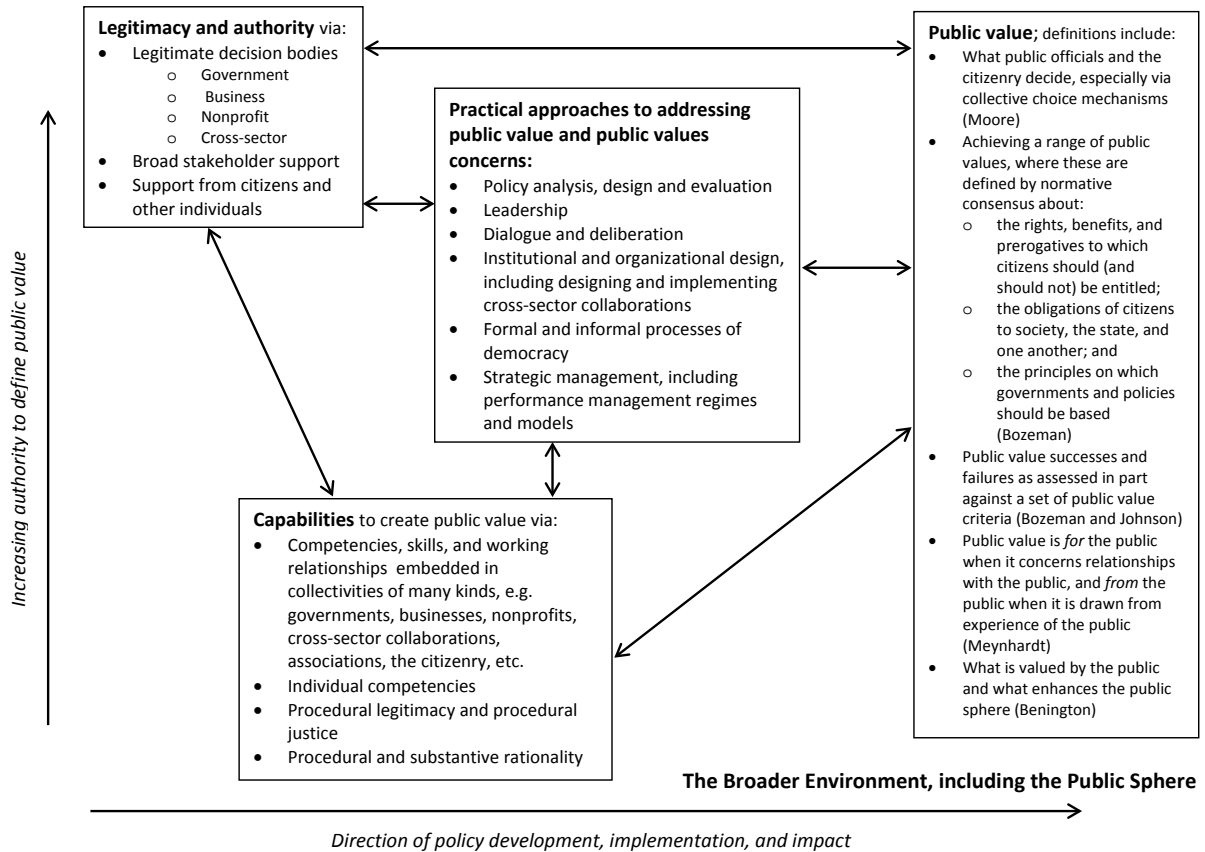


Figure 1.2 The Public Value Governance Triangle (Source: Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg, 2015, p. 15)

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