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Nancy Alfaro as an Exemplary Collaborative Public Manager: How Customer Service Was Aligned with Customer Needs

Administrative Profile

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Nancy Alfaro is the quintessential practitioner of collaborative public management. More than that, she is a collaborative public manager focused on delivering customer service. Finding herself in the midst of a flurry of activity when San Francisco mayor Gavin Newsom suddenly ordered her to allow same-sex marriages in 2004, she pulled together the resources to perform more than 1,000 weddings in three days. Now, as director of San Francisco's 311 Customer Service Center, Alfaro oversees an operation that has reduced the number of telephone numbers residents may need to call for information and nonemergency services from 2,300 to just one. How Ms. Alfaro accomplished these remarkable tasks can be the source of fruitful lessons for other public officials.

On February 12, 2004, Mayor Gavin Newsom of San Francisco made headlines across the country by ordering the county clerk to license and perform same-sex marriages. In doing so, he defied a state law, enacted by the voters in 2000, prohibiting marriage between anyone but a man and a woman. By the end of the second day after Newsom's order, 680 couples from around the country had been wed. The third day was a Saturday, Valentine's Day, which saw another 450 weddings take place.

This profile presents the administrator who was at the center of that storm, Nancy Alfaro, then county clerk. It will examine her work as county clerk and then assess her more recent role as director of San Francisco's 311 Customer Service Center. The profile is based on two hour-long interviews with Alfaro and conversations with seven of her colleagues who worked with her in her present or former capacity.

Both periods demonstrate a collaborative public management style, which is defined by O'Leary, Gerard, and Bingham as "facilitating and operating in multiorganizational arrangements to solve problems that can't be solved or easily solved by single organizations" (2006, 7). However, in this case, it is collaborative management with a twist—collaboration focused on customer service management. Customer service is more typically defined as the management of internal organization processes to satisfy customer (or citizen) expectations by providing information and solving problems in a timely and consistent manner (Wagenheim and Reurink 1991). As will be seen, the 311 Customer Service Center reconfigures much of the premise of how citizens access government for service delivery.

The Eye of the Storm

The tidal wave of marriage license applications at the county clerk's office was the result of pent-up demand among gay and lesbian couples who had been denied the right to marry under state law. It also was a reaction to legal challenges that threatened to shut down the entire operation at any time. (In fact, the state supreme court ordered an end to the marriages one month later.) "The line on Saturday was so formidable, accompanied by daylong traffic congestion and happily honking cars on Van Ness Avenue, that it turned into a take-a-number event that at times resembled a Las Vegas wedding chapel," reported the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "Overwhelmed workers handed out numbers to 320 couples who couldn't be accommodated on Saturday, asking them to return [the following day] at scheduled times" (Kim and Asimov 2004).

It was Nancy Alfaro's responsibility to turn chaos into order. As county clerk, licensing and performing marriages was her responsibility. "That was very historical, very exciting." Alfaro recollected, "I absolutely believe in everything we did. I was supportive of the idea and the principle; it was the right thing to do." She described the time as "extremely emotional" as well. People were flying in from all over the country to get their licenses and camping out in the rain. Alfaro, her small staff, and volunteers worked 18-hour days and on weekends to accommodate the demand. "I know we made a difference in the lives of the 4,034 couples who [ultimately] got their licenses, and that is significant."

Alfaro is that kind of manager—one who can face the deluge enveloping her and her organization and channel it into positive action. It was like the typhoon in Burma, one former city administrator recounted—all of a sudden it was there. Consider thousands of forms and certificates that needed to be prepared with the new wording. The Department of Public Works put out portable toilets for the couples who waited in line for their turn (sometimes overnight). Another city staffer reprogrammed the lighting to illuminate the city hall exterior all night. Another brought love songs on CDs to play in the rotunda (Gordon 2004). Cakes and flowers showed up in city hall, sent in appreciation of what the clerk's office was doing.

How did she manage? Alfaro has an "uncanny ability" to calm people down and get the best out of them in hectic situations, according to the former director of administrative services for the city, who was responsible for her appointment. Alfaro and her staff further relied on dozens of volunteers from other city hall offices and from the community. The other officials were willing to pitch in because that is what Alfaro and her staff always do when they need additional support. Collaborative managers assemble and direct participants across organizational lines to address issues that are beyond the capacity of any one actor. While they aren't always able to order activity, they are responsible for the collective outcome (McGuire 2006). Alfaro is a collaborative manager's manager.

Alfaro also managed the flurry of wedding vows because she and her staff had already laid the groundwork. Early in her tenure as county clerk, they had taken a haphazard process, formalized it, and automated it. The practice had been that couples might show up to be married at noon when staff were all at lunch, or when they were occupied with other marriages. The staff wouldn't know whether to expect two

or 22 couples, and the result, sometimes, was a long wait. Alfaro's team developed an online appointment scheduling system and ensured that she had sufficient people on hand to meet the demand.

Another of her proudest achievements was the development of a process for deputizing volunteers to perform marriages. Beginning with the recruitment and training of just two volunteers, the pilot project was so successful that Alfaro wrote procedures, put an ad in the paper, received 50 applications, and interviewed and "hired" 10 more volunteers. She insisted they be city residents, so that this would serve as a means for cementing the ties between the city and its citizens. Today, the clerk's office has some 23 volunteers with diverse cultural and language abilities. "Other counties have modeled programs after ours," Alfaro explained. "Its success depends on who you choose as volunteers. You have to interview them as though you are going to hire them as employees." One of her longtime volunteers, a retired school teacher, praised Alfaro's focus and clarity. She also commented that whether one marriage or 100 were to take place that day, Alfaro and her staff strove to ensure that each couple was presented with the time and environment to make their wedding special. (Is she always so proficient? Well, not once she gets in a car, the volunteer admitted—she has no sense of direction and can get lost just driving across the city.)

Who Is Nancy Alfaro?

Born in San Francisco, Alfaro moved at the age of six to El Salvador, her parents' birthplace. She lived there for nine years, returning to the San Francisco area in 1981 because of civil war in El Salvador. After graduating high school in the town of South San Francisco, Alfaro attended San Francisco State University and earned a bachelor's degree in business. From there, she went to work in the private sector. In 1992, Alfaro was hired as a management assistant by the San Francisco County Clerk's Office. She worked her way up, and was appointed county clerk in 1997. During her tenure with the city, elected officials have taken advantage of her dedication and organizing skills. She has served on the Customer Service and Efficiency Task Force and the Small Business Advisory Task Force. Alfaro also worked actively with the California County Clerk and Election Officials Legislative Committee to draft proposed language for amendments to the Family Law and Business and Profession codes.

Balancing her life between work and her husband and two young boys, Alfaro has also served as president of her son's school board. The inevitable stress that

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her workload brings is positive for her family, in her view, because it shows her sons that a woman can do anything. Always aware of stereotypes associated with Latinos, she consciously works to undermine them. If Alfaro has one regret, it is that she didn't pursue additional education. Her parents weren't in a position to provide financial support, and she did not have someone to point her toward academic programs or scholarships that she could have pursued.

Alfaro describes her management style as "very open door, approachable." Knowing how to assess people's strengths and weaknesses, she gives them projects that take advantage of their strengths at a level of responsibility they are ready for. She also ensures that people understand her expectations of them and are given clear direction. Alfaro meets with her employees on a regular basis to ask how they are doing and whether they still like their jobs. If she has one fault, those interviewed agreed, it's that she takes on too much—that she is reluctant to say no. Alfaro confessed, "I have come to realize I can't do everything, even though I would like to do everything."

Birth of a Network

On March 29, 2007, Mayor Newsom announced the opening of a new customer service center that would allow city residents to call one telephone number—311—to inquire about any city service, make a request, or report a problem. Is there graffiti on a building near your home? Call 311 and the request to have it removed will be entered into the system. Want more information about a city event? Call 311. Did you lose your cane on a city bus? "We'll do our best to find your cane," a customer service representative promised a caller shortly after 311 was launched (Vega 2007). At the time, there were 2,300 different telephone numbers for local government services. Now, there are only two to remember: 911 for emergencies, and 311 for everything else.

Perhaps these telephone numbers illustrate the change in direction facilitated by collaborative management in government. Nye (2002) describes this in his introduction to Harvard University's study of global forces as governments move to governance. In Nye's view, the twentieth century was characterized by centripetal forces (hence the 2,300 telephone numbers that sprouted to respond to San Franciscans' every need and defined agency service domains). In the twenty-first century, centrifugal forces predominate (hundreds of separate telephone numbers have been distilled into just two with agencies linked and bureaucratic boundaries put aside).

The 311 customer service idea did not originate in San Francisco. Then-supervisor Newsom was inspired by a visit to the city of Baltimore. He had already set up the task force to address customer service and sponsored a ballot initiative that would require city agencies to formulate long-range plans that included customer service objectives, service standards, and customer satisfaction metrics. When Newsom was elected mayor, customer service remained a top priority.

Nancy Alfaro was appointed deputy director of the 311 Customer Service Center based on her record of providing customer service as county clerk and the wide array of contacts she had made across the city. San Francisco is the only consolidated city and county in the state, and comprises 50 departments that tend to work independently while competing for the limited resources apportioned by the Board of Supervisors (Friedrichsen 2006). Ensuring that a limited group of customer service representatives (CSRs) has the information to respond correctly and immediately to thousands of inquiries requires exceptional organizing ability. It requires a manager who will empower her employees and ensure they have the training and technology required to respond to customers (Wagenheim and Reurink 1991). Alfaro had proven her capabilities as county clerk, particularly during the monthlong stampede for same-sex marriage licenses. She was pleased to be asked to work on 311: "I thought, if I am been able to [improve customer service] in this little [county clerk's] office and if I could do this for every person that touches San Francisco, I thought that would be very exciting." After six months, the previous director was appointed director of public works, and the mayor asked Alfaro to assume the directorship of 311.

Alfaro is operating a network, which is defined by O'Toole as a "structure of interdependence involving multiple organizations or parts thereof, where one unit is not merely the formal subordinate of others in some larger hierarchal arrangement" (1997, 45). This is another key feature of collaborative management: It disintermediates organizational fiefdoms. Alfaro has no authority to direct agencies to respond to the customers who call 311. Rather, the CSRs work across organizational boundaries to achieve common objectives. The 311 service is an example of informational, collaborative public administration (Argranoff 2006), but with a twist. The focus is not on solving social problems on a macro basis, but rather linking customers, one at a time, with service providers.

Focusing on Customer Service and Building Partnerships

The 311 enterprise makes a key assumption: that it ought to be easy for citizens to make requests for basic city services, and that the fast and efficient completion of those requests will allow agencies to focus on larger, more complicated problems. That statement, as a customer service concept in government, has generated

controversy in public administration. The regulatory and accountability dimensions of many government programs have, in the past, focused service provision on eligibility determination and legal compliance.

However, in the context of 311, it simply means government understanding and responding to citizens' expectations for more convenient, timely, and responsive service delivery (Hyde and Olshfski 2008). A central conduit and agency network for service delivery isn't going to address homelessness, but it can aid one destitute person at a time as the appropriate agency is alerted by a concerned citizen's call to 311. It can enhance citizen engagement, one disaffected citizen at a time, when the CSR refers that citizen to the proper forum to weigh in on the proposed business expansion in her neighborhood. It can empower citizens who are alienated from city hall by the lack of response from city agencies to their concerns about graffiti or abandoned cars (Kathi and Cooper 2005).

Collaboration requires agencies to give up some of the control they once had over the service they provided themselves in the past. Giving up such independence can be a threat to an effective partnership (Ho 2002). Alfaro's team has encountered those concerns: "It requires ensuring the agency can see the benefit. We are not doing performance management—it is a partnership we are building. Ultimately, it is the customer that is getting the benefit. You have to really work with the agency to help them see we are not trying to take ownership. We are trying to help them fulfill their core mission. We are not going to do anything that is not directed by them. You have to build that trust and honesty," she said.

Because San Francisco is so decentralized, Alfaro had to use informal authority and collaborative skills to build a cross-government network. There is no established mechanism in the city for doing so. San Francisco is "about as far from a military hierarchy as you can get," according to one department head. The mayor's directives are sometimes ignored; that is part of the city's culture. It is a testament to Alfaro's collaborative skills that she was able to establish such a network.

The Calls
The calls received by the 311 system run the gamut. About 4,000 calls are received each day from Municipal Railway (Muni) patrons trying to find out how to get from here to there or lodging a complaint. There is a serial caller known as the "graffiti wolf" who calls several times a day to report graffiti in all parts of the city. Others want to register for a Parks and Recreation Department program, report an abandoned mattress on the sidewalk, request a certified copy of a birth certificate, or find in-home health care for a grandfather (Colin 2007). Those who want to make their request in another language will find translation available in 175 languages.

The 311 Customer Service Center is "a service that resembles a kind of a Google hotline just for San Francisco" (Colin 2007). It allows citizens to ask any question of the CSR, who takes the call with a high likelihood of getting an answer. It is the kind of "one-stop service center" that has reemerged in recent years, facilitated by technology that makes it possible for CSRs to access a wide array of data (Ho 2002).

As Kettl (2006) reminds us, traditional public administration is built on stable structures with rigid boundaries—a configuration that is at variance with solutions to today's "wicked problems." The 311 service does not dismantle barriers, but rather makes them transparent to the citizen. The real issue is not necessarily that there is growing complexity in problems and increasing interdependence that makes solutions difficult. Actually, as Rittel, who coined the term "wicked problem" writes, the central dimension of the problem is confusion, especially among clients and decision makers, because of ill-formulated problems, poor information, and conflicting values (Rittel and Webber 1973).

Nancy Alfaro sees her role as working collaboratively with every city agency to acquire the information needed to answer questions and provide services. She has overseen the development of a database of 6,000 frequently asked questions and answers to those questions. This enables the 68 CSRs to respond to most calls directly. The initial expectation was that the center would handle 1.2 million calls annually. It is now predicting a volume of 5.6 million calls for the next fiscal year. Without any marketing, calls are increasing at a rate of 7 percent to 9 percent each month. Meanwhile, other city agencies are asking to become part of the network, so many that Alfaro has to say, "Wait, we're not ready for you yet!"

Alfaro is very clear: "311 is not a glorified switchboard." Representatives do not simply transfer calls to city departments. The goal is to satisfy the customer at the time of the call, and CSRs do so 95 percent of the time. If the answer isn't in the knowledge database at time of the call, the question is referred to the content team, who will research the issue, get back to the caller, and add the question to the database. Moreover, unlike most city departments, 311 is up and running 24/7. Only 45 percent of its call volume occurs during the standard Monday through Friday workweek. "So it shows clearly that people need access to government at all hours," Alfaro commented. "At midnight and 1:00 in the morning, we are still getting over 200 calls an hour."

Moreover, the benefit provided by 311 doesn't stop there. When a caller requests a service—for example, that a pothole be filled—the request is given a tracking number and routed directly to the Department of Public Works, which will service the request. When the request has been met, that information is routed back to 311 so that citizens can learn the status of their requests simply by calling 311 again.

Evidence of Success

Such a process simply didn't exist before. Citizen requests for service often fell through the cracks, and citizens had no way of knowing when or if their request or complaint would be heeded. Alfaro's team set up a process that improved the front-end customer experience. The process is tighter and more professional, according to one department head. Previously, at the Housing Authority, for example, with only one person taking service requests, many work orders would be input late in the day, causing the agency to incur overtime charges. With 311 now taking the requests, overtime costs have been reduced by 15 percent to 20 percent.

At the Municipal Transit Agency (MTA), a request that a curb be painted red for a no-parking zone or white for a commercial zone used to be a paper process. Citizens would complete a paper form and mail it to the MTA. An MTA representative would call them to discuss the request and then ask the customer to mail in payment. Now 311 takes the requests, reducing a several-step process to just two. Information about transit schedules and routes is now available 24/7, hours longer than it was when the MTA handled the calls. The MTA is currently working with 311 to identify locations where requests for the arrival time of the next transit vehicle are most frequent. With this information, the MTA can post signs displaying this information where there is the greatest demand. This benefits patrons, who know how long the wait will be at their stop; the MTA, which knows where to invest funds; and 311, which can reduce the number of callers requesting this information. "Nancy is always nudging us toward progress," reported an MTA manager.

Another example is the Department of Public Works, which has now developed service-level goals so that it can make the commitment that potholes will be filled in two days. A backlog of 30,000 open cases at the department has been reduced to 4,000, many of which are within service-level goals.

One satisfied customer is the San Francisco Bicycle Coalition, an important advocacy group in a city where nearly 30,000 people use bikes as their primary means of transportation. A priority for the coalition has been to improve pavement quality to reduce the number of accidents caused by potholes and other such hazards. Volunteers routinely canvass the city to identify the hazards and report them to 311. According to the director, 311 staff have not only efficiently fielded their calls, they also have worked with the coalition to streamline the process. For example, at the suggestion of 311 staff, the coalition now uses an e-mail address to submit their multiple reports and tags them as coming from the coalition. That way, 311 can provide them with a report detailing the number of complaints that are still open and those that have been attended to.

More than Customer Service

Alfaro takes the collaborative effort one step further. In Moore's parlance (1994), she manages outward and facilitates inward. She meets with larger departments once a month to go over outstanding service requests received at the center. The department head is asked when the service will be provided, and he or she is reminded that citizens often are satisfied simply by knowing when they can expect their request to be met. "If it is graffiti on a public property, it might take 48 hours [for it to be removed]; if it is graffiti on private property, that might take 30 days," she suggested as an example. At least the customer knows not to expect results before that time.

Under Alfaro's direction, 311 has become more than a hotline—it is a method for building accountability into processes where it didn't exist before. Department heads are presented with clear data about service requests or complaints that have come in and have not been resolved. This is where the reciprocity in the collaborative relationship comes in: Department officials use the reports that Alfaro provides to follow up on service requests. The systematic information they receive from 311 enables them to provide better service. They can also use the information to spot trends. If there is a spate of calls coming in about graffiti in a particular area, the department head may realize that a partnership needs to be developed with the police

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department in response. The Department of Public Works is beginning to use the data provided by 311 to track which parts of the city record lower response to pothole requests, so that problems can be identified and addressed.

The 311 operation is funded by the city's general fund. However, in some cases, funding and personnel are transferred from other agencies that no longer need to staff caller response centers themselves. This was the case with the MTA passenger center and public works call centers, which were transferred in their entirety to 311. The center is also getting some funding from other enterprise agencies, so the portion of the budget funded by the general fund declined from 2007 to 2008. When it first agrees to establish a partnership with an agency, the 311 team does a business process analysis, including an examination of staffing. If the agency has staff taking calls from customers, the 311 team "has a conversation with them" about moving those staff to the 311 center.

A unique set of skills is required to manage such networks—negotiation and collaboration (Goldsmith and Eggers 2004)—and Alfaro has them. The process of collaboration has to be mutually beneficial to succeed (Thomson and Perry 2006). Why should these department heads cooperate with her? "We all agree that we are here to achieve that ultimate goal—to serve customers," Alfaro responded. The consolidated information about service requests helps department directors follow up with their own staff. They also may use the reports to show the budget office that they require greater resources or staffing. Department heads are aware that at any time, the mayor can look at those reports. In my opinion," said Alfaro, "it's a win–win for everybody."

Moving Forward

Alfaro's short-term objectives for 311 include developing its online counterpart, so that the full knowledge base will be available to the public online. "So," Alfaro explained, "if you wanted a new parking sign in your neighborhood, you would know where to find out how to request it." The problem with online government service now is that the service people want may not be online, or they may make the request and never hear back. The 311 online service will provide citizens with a tracking number so that they can follow the progress of their requests. It is already providing that service on behalf of the MTA, and it has plans to expand the service to the Departments of Public Works and Parks and Recreation in the fall. "We need to find alternative ways of communicating with 311 and still building transparency out there," Alfaro said.

If there is a downside to 311, it is that the calls are increasing, but Alfaro's staffing levels are not. "Our goal is to answer 80 percent of the calls within 60 seconds," Alfaro affirmed. "For the past four months we have not met that goal. We are answering only about 60 percent of calls in that time frame." So, moving some of the traffic from the telephone to the Internet will improve efficiency. Alfaro is also developing a multipurpose form that will facilitate the transmittal of reports and requests to most city agencies. Eventually, a citizen who wants to open a business, for example, will be able to complete just one form, which will then be routed to all of the agencies that may be involved in the approval process. The prospective business owner will be able to check the status of his or her request with each of the departments at any time.

In recognition of their exceptional work in launching the 311 center and building the knowledge base, Alfaro and her team received a 2008 Managerial Excellence Award from the Municipal Fiscal Advisory Committee. "This is the biggest recognition you can receive as a city employee, and I was very proud of getting that." Alfaro said. The Municipal Fiscal Advisory Committee comprises business representatives and community leaders who provide pro bono management and consulting services to the mayor of San Francisco. Each year, it recognized a limited number of San Francisco managers for their exemplary job performance and leadership.

The 311 Customer Service Center represents a flourishing network and a testament to Nancy Alfaro's skills as a collaborative manager. In a city where departments are accustomed to going their own way, she has successfully built a cross-government alliance that provides a single point of access for information and service requests. This required Alfaro to know what is reasonable to ask of people, and to use her experience and reputation to find the right people to work with. Could another city replicate 311? In a city with a city manager who has direct authority over departments, using today's technology, it should be easy. In a city as decentralized as San Francisco, a unique kind of collaborative manager is needed.

Recently, the California Supreme Court ruled on a challenge to the state law banning gay marriages that had been filed at the time San Francisco was ordered to halt the issuance of marriage licenses to same-sex couples. The challenge asserted that the law was a violation of state residents' constitutional right to equal protection. The court agreed, and on June 17, 2008, San Francisco and other counties statewide began issuing licenses to same-sex couples. Nancy Alfaro was on hand to help.

Postscript

In late 2008, California voters passed an initiative to amend the state constitution to ban same-sex

marriage, effectively overwriting the California Supreme Court's decision. A week after thousands of people took to the streets to protest the amendment, the high court agreed to hear challenges to it. Opponents of the ban claim that the amendment makes a fundamental change to individual rights and judicial responsibilities, and therefore amounts to a revision of the state constitution, not just an amendment. A revision would require a two-thirds vote by the legislature to appear on the ballot, instead of the roughly 700,000 signatures of registered voters required for an amendment. Also left for the court to resolve is whether those marriages that took place after its ruling can remain in effect.

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