The Justice Academy Journal

Law and Justice Executive Series

July 2017 - Volume 1

Public Policy Debate, Leadership, and Governance

-The Green Grass Strategy-

Much has been written about the establishment of public policy, the qualities of effective leadership, and the mechanisms of effective governance. Opinions about these subjects abound and almost everyone has a viewpoint on the matter, but rarely have I observed an underlying political philosophy that aggregates the three into a political strategy that truly isolates the issues, formulates a trajectory, and provides an effective public policy leading to the attainment of societal improvement. It is the objective of this composition to examine and discuss, in detail, the interrelation that exists between these subjects, in order to provide a philosophical framework for those grappling with the challenges of today's society in hopes that they might use this information to support the notion of political clarity, multivariate reason, and the formulation of laws and policies that are based on the detailed examination of the issues rather than partisan conjecture.

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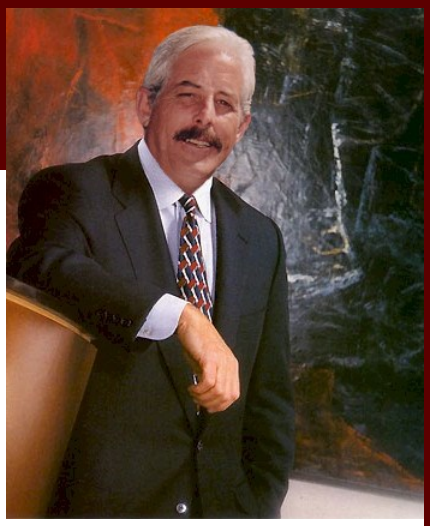
In order to properly understand the context of our form of governance, it is necessary to reconsider why it is we operate under a participative form of representative government. At the very heart of the matter, irrespective of whether we are endeavoring to lead a department, city, county, state, or nation, we find an assembly of representatives that were elected or promoted to their position based on their past achievements and promise, with the hope that they can adequately express the concerns and needs of those they represent. This representative approach does not exist simply to make sure that those who are eventually the subjects of either a department policy or the laws enacted by legislature and congressional authority believe that their viewpoints were taken into consideration before the adoption of the statutes and public policies that they must live by. It's much more involved than that and it is predicated on logic and reason. Since none of us knows everything, about every issue, we endeavor to create a representative form of government that maximizes the likelihood that all of the relevant factors that are germane to an issue will be adequately expressed during the representative process and well before the enactment of laws and public policies that govern the jurisdiction.

Under such a form of representative governance, there is the hope that by providing a mechanism for widespread public debate about any issue, those engaged in the discourse will offer insights into the factors affecting the matter and that they can successfully illuminate all of the variables that need to be considered and which might provide a degree of correlation about the influence of factors regarding the problem. Ideally, elected representatives use this public debate process to their advantage and will absorb the input provided by their constituents during the legislative process. The next step is assembling this information into a logical structure based on those factors that exert the most influence over the outcome, as well as the recognition of each factor's degree of relative susceptibility to manipulation. I will discuss this in greater detail later in the article.

No matter the region or jurisdiction being governed, there are typically multiple representatives who assemble, under a set of rules prescribed by the governing body, to discuss and debate proposed legislation. It is at this point in the process when all too often we see the legislative processes break down and we witness partisan politics take control.

About the Author



Judge Hal Campbell, Ph.D.

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Judge Campbell recently concluded a term of service as a member of the judiciary in the State of Montana. His appointment to the bench was bestowed by the Montana Supreme Court, Commission on Courts of Limited Jurisdiction, Prior to this appointment to the bench, he served for over twenty-five years as a tenured professor and department chair with the California State University His public policy and law enforcement experience includes a variety of senior management positions with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. From 1978 to 1989 he held positions in the department including Law Enforcement Planning Coordinator, Chief Analyst, and began his career as a Deputy Sheriff .

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As we can observe in virtually every city council, county commission, state assembly, and congressional deliberation, partisanship has a tendency to overpower reason because somehow we have forgotten the guiding principle that prescribes that all relevant factors pertaining to an issue must be examined and evaluated before crafting legislative language necessary to the new law or public policy. Due largely to the contemporary viewpoint of partisan politics at all costs, as well as a reliance on a predetermined point of departure based on party affiliation and philosophy, we find that often times the public interest is forsaken by members of both political parties. This results in a general failure by our elected representatives to not only properly understand the importance of multivariate reasoning to decision making, but we find ourselves in a situation where laws are enacted without sufficient regard to all of the important factors that needed to be considered in order to create effective public policy.

There are innumerable shortcomings to such an approach and no matter which side of aisle you occupy; everyone maintains a degree of culpability in failing to adequately represent the interest of their constituents. Within bureaucracies as well, we find so-called leaders who decide departmental trajectory and priorities through a combination of limited vision and sheer force of will, rather by engaging in an open and free discussion among their senior executives in order to identify and diagnose all of the factors that might be relevant to the issue. Such an approach is almost certain to result in an inadequate public policy that fails to mitigate the challenges it endeavored to resolve.

Now that we have sufficiently prescribed the problem, it's time to focus on a strategy and philosophy that it useful in overcoming this deficiency. The Green Grass Strategy endeavors to prescribe a multidimensional framework of reasoning that can be used effectively to postulate the relevant factors that may affect the situation under debate, and do so in a manner that focuses the public discourse and debate squarely on the relevant issues that are contributive to the problem at hand, rather than perpetuating a test of wills based on faulty logic, fallacies of reasoning, and partisan politics. The strategy relies on a variety of analytics, but at the very heart of the strategy is the notion that only multidirectional logic and reasoning can sufficiently isolate all of the factors associated with the problem and serve to illuminate a precise level of understanding necessary to the formulation of effective decision making. Some of the factors might be more influential than others in determining the outcome. Some will have a direct relationship to the outcome, while others maintain an indirect form of correlation. Still others will be tertiary to the problem, but still worthy of including within the analysis. There will be factors that are susceptible to direct control and those that we have no control over whatsoever. Finally, some of the factors we include within our analysis will have a "lead" effect, while still others demonstrate a lag propensity. No matter the individual characteristic possessed by the independent variables that we include within the process, the idea is to postulate a theoretical basis for the inclusion of variables, followed by an hypothesis about all of the possible factors that might combine to affect the outcome and then to arrange these variables in a logical structure that we can use to formulate effective and deliberate public policy.

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The Green Grass Strategy derives its name from the example used to explain the process, but it can be applied to virtually every aspect of the decision making process. The strategy relies on the concept of multiple correlation analysis, but with the inclusion of both vertical and perpendicular logic axes. Now that probably just frightened you a little, but it isn't that difficult to understand. Remember, you don't have to do the math associated with the strategy. That's why God created mathematicians, but you and your constituents are the subject matter experts in the room who can postulate the varied assortment of factors that may well be associated with the issue under examination.

To further explain the concept let's begin by identifying the dependent variable (i.e., green grass). As you might surmise, there are all sorts of measures that can be used to decide how green grass grows. These could range from lush emerald green, to light green, to somewhat green, and at the other end of the spectrum, totally dry, brittle, and brown grass. The point here is that it is necessary to collectively decide (specifically) how it is you wish to define the dependent variable (grass color) and how to quantify it before proceeding to the next step in the debate process of postulating all of the possible reasons that could account for its condition and color.

Now that we have a grasp on defining the dependent variable (Y') the next step in the process is to consider, or hypothesize if you prefer, the major categories of influence that might impact the color and condition of the grass. To keep it simple, let's use only three "independent" variables that may be influential. The identification of these factors would naturally follow a review of the literature to reveal what various experts believe or conjecture that may account for the color of grass. These could include such factors as; (x1) average daily temperature, (x2) average soil moisture content, and (x3) the composition of the soil. Clearly there are a great many more possibilities to consider but this should suffice for our purposes of explaining the strategy. The next step in the process is to come up with a consensus that everyone can agree upon, about how to quantify all of the variables within the analysis. As you might expect there are innumerable methods of assigning a value to each of the independent factors that we have included in the equation, so to avoid dispute, it is advantageous to make sure everyone in the process is in agreement at the outset about how to quantify the variables that will be used.

Again, to make this explanation as simple as possible, let's presume that our results will show that each of the independent variables we have postulated maintains an equal level of relative strength or correlation, over the dependent variable. In other words, although it's way too early in the process, we will assume that temperature, moisture, and soil composition each account for thirty-three percent of the influence over how green the grass grows. The temptation now is to conduct a survey of lawns in the neighborhood to collect our data, and conduct a statistical analysis of the variables in an effort to discover the level of correlation that exists between each of these factors (independently) and how they impact the color of the grass (collectively). Unfortunately, this would conceal from our view the subtle nature of the world and serve to mask the complexities at work in a fully articulated model that we as elected representatives were chosen by our constituents to identify.

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To make certain that we have identified all of the factors that might combine to influence the color of the grass, we next need to examine the vertical logic of the equation. In other words, we need to understand how each "independent" variable is affected by more discreet influences, so that we optimize not only our level of understanding, but also so that we maximize our level of control as public policy makers.

Beginning with (x1) the average daily temperature, we can postulate that the season of the year might have degree of influence over how hot or cold it is within the area occupied by the grass. This might be followed by the positional longitude of the grass in relation to the earth. In other words how far north the lawn is, might affect the number of photons hitting the surface of the ground where the lawn resides, and in turn, that may have an effect on the color of the grass. Finally, obstructions or impediments to sunlight on the lawn (i.e., trees) and the shadow they cast might be a reasonable explanation for the average temperature of the ground upon which the grass grows.

With regard to average soil moisture content (x2) it might be prudent to consider several important factors. The first might be the average rainfall during the growing season. Next might be how often the lawn is watered, followed by the duration of the watering. What might not be apparent, but which serves as another relevant factor, is the slope of the lawn. If the lawn is not level, then the slope of ground upon which the lawn resides will certainly have some degree of influence over moisture content. Drainage, as measured in gallons per hour (for example) will mitigate the benefits of irrigation and the water that is placed on the grass will most certainly, as a result of slope and gravity, have a tendency to puddle in a low spot leaving the rest of the lawn with a lesser amount of moisture. It's kind of important to think through the relevance of variables such as slope. You may not be able to do anything about it, but since it has an effect on how green the grass is, it needs to be factored into your analysis. Next we might want to consider the variable of evaporation. Water sprinkled on the lawn will evaporate because of wind passing over the surface of the grass. The greater the wind speed and the dryer the air, the greater the level of evaporation that will occur throughout the lawn and less likely it is that our grass will be sufficiently moist and become green. Combine this with slope and now there are two critical level variables that are largely influential in determining how green our grass is, but which are well beyond your control.

Finally, we need to understand how green the grass is relative to the composition of the soil (x3). Determining a quantification method is very important to this factor and assuring consensus among all of those involved in the public policy process is a requirement. If we don't agree on how it is we quantified the variable itself, then we will not likely agree on the results of the analysis. Sandy or rocky soil, for example, doesn't retain water very well because the water has very little to connect with, resulting in an inability to maintain moisture level in the soil, under the grass. Grass planted in sandy soil will not have an adequate supply of water at the roots, and this in turn, will impact the color of the lawn. This is a variable that we can exert influence over however, and as a matter of public policy, we might decide to spend our resources augmenting the soil composition to include new dirt that has a higher level of moisture retention. Also impacting this independent variable is the level of nutrients present within the soil. Grass relies on nitrogen and other minerals to grow and accordingly, as we increase the nutrient level in the soil, we positively influence how green the grass can become.

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So far we have examined the horizontal and vertical factors in our equation, but there is yet another dimension that we need to examine in order to discern the most comprehensive public policy possible. It's referred to as the perpendicular axis of relevance. This is usually where the amateurs drop out but hang in there, it's almost over. Let's use the (x2) average soil moisture content variable to illustrate how this tertiary level of influence might be relevant to our aggregate equation. As we discussed, average soil moisture content is important to how green our grass will become. The vertical factors that we postulated included average rainfall, how often the lawn is watered by means of irrigation, the duration of watering, slope of the lawn, and the associated degree of drainage that occurs, and finally the amount of evaporation that occurs throughout the lawn. As we alluded to earlier, each of these factors exerts a degree of influence over soil moisture. Unfortunately, the world is not constructed in equal proportions. One factor might account for fifty percent of the influence over soil moisture, while another accounts for twenty percent, with the remaining factors combining to account for only ten percent. The aggregate influence only totals eighty percent of the variability in the soils moisture content which means we failed to correctly hypothesize those additional variables that constitute the remaining twenty percent of the equation. We may never find all of the factors that are needed to accurately prescribe the moisture content of the lawn, but it is important that we be open minded to the suggestions and assertions by other people engaged in the public policy debate because they might just have provided us with a glimpse into the missing variables. We also need to acknowledge that we don't have all the answers to the question of soil moisture and that the public policy we crafted is somewhat deficient in addressing all of the factors that combine to influence the color of the grass.

Looking perpendicularly is helpful in extending our understanding of the situation and in identifying potentially controllable variables that iteratively impact the greater equation. To keep it simple, and since we already know that wind speed affects evaporation, we might want to consider what it is that impacts wind speed. By planting a row of trees, for example, we place a barrier that influences wind speed over the surface of the lawn. This in turn lessens the evaporation factor, which favorably impacts soil moisture content. In effect, we have isolated a perpendicular axis of relevance to the equation and provided ourselves with a degree of control over a subtle level variable. Although we cannot do anything about how much wind the earth creates over the lawn, we can most certainly take steps to create a barrier that lessens that velocity of the wind over the grass, which favorable impact the major variable of soil moisture content.

Balance is important at this point of the endeavor because too much nitrogen, or not enough water, or too much sun light, or not enough shade, and insufficient drainage, or too much drainage can work against us, and the result is a brown lawn. Knowing the variables that play a role in determining the color of grass, and then determining which we can control and which we have no control over is important, and then finding just the right balance between all these factors in order to assure that we attain the greenest grass possible should be our public policy goal. This requires data in order to properly assess the relative strength of each horizontal variable in determining the color of the grass. We also need to know the influence and predictive power that each individual factor contained within the vertical, and perpendicular axes has over the major variables so that we can fine tune our level of understanding.

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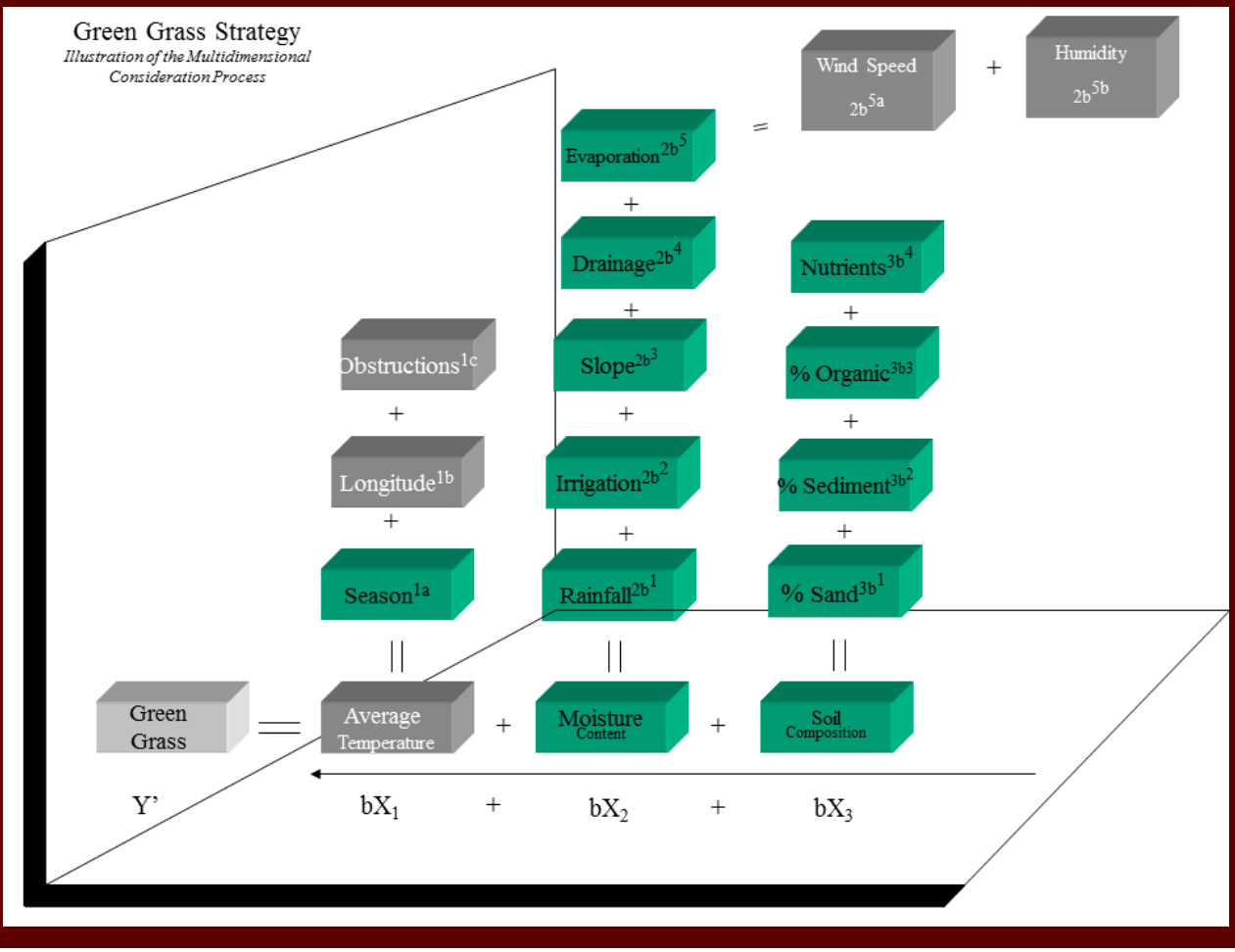
If I lost you during this treatment of horizontal, vertical, and perpendicular logic, don't feel bad, but recognize that something as perceivably simple as determining the factors associated with how green the grass grows isn't simple at all. It's very complicated and so are public policy debates. There are a significant number of disproportional levels of influence at work in such an equation. Some have a direct correlation, while others are indirect. Some are controllable, while others are absolutely uncontrollable. Some have a lead level of influence such as fertilizing the lawn. It doesn't turn green instantly, but rather, adding fertilizer is a lead variable that influences the color of the grass a few weeks later. Some of the independent variables maintain a positive correlation to the color of the grass, such as water and the color of the lawn, while still others possess an inverse relationship such as fungus spores per square foot of grass. The less fungus there is per square foot of lawn the healthier the lawn is, and the healthier the lawn is, the greener it appears. You may have noticed that I have avoided any of the associated mathematics involved in this example, but I can assure you, somewhere within your reach as a public official is a statistical analyst that can collect the data, run the correlation coefficients necessary to gauge the degree of association between dependent and independent variables, calculate the regression coefficients necessary to build a predictive model, and answer the what-if questions that you contrive ahead of policy implementation so that you can examine the probable outcome of a change in trajectory before you actually create and implement the final public policy.

If we were to construct a graphic representation of the analytical process that we just completed, it might look like this. Each of the variables in the vertical axes might have its own set of perpendicular factors in a fully articulated grand equation. Can you think of any?



All three axes of thought and their hypothesized interrelations are represented in relation to the dependent variable (color of the grass), and in turn to each variable hypothesized within both the vertical and perpendicular axes of the equation are defined. This process of graphically representing the logic of a decision making process can be invaluable to public policy debates and make clear the underlying logic for your decisions. Imagine the change in tone and tenor of public discourse and debate in the halls of government if our deliberations centered on those factors that might be influential in determining the outcome, rather than on one another, or irrelevant matters such as political viewpoint and party affiliation. Gridlock may actually cease to exist and we might, as a nation get back on track to dealing with our problems. Doesn't it make sense that all of our elected officials and department leaders should spend their time and energies focusing on identifying those factors that correlate to the outcome, and which assert a level of influence over the problem at hand, so that they can be manipulated in order to derive the most effective public policy possible. Doesn't it also make sense that if our public leaders actually engaged in a debate over whether a variable had a positive or negative correlation, the percentage of influence these variables have over another, or whether a variable contained within the vertical axis was really supposed to be there, as opposed to being viewed more correctly within the perpendicular level of influence that we would be farther along in creating a forum for the civil exchange of ideas, leadership, and governance.

From my vantage point, this is precisely what is wrong with contemporary politics, leadership, and governance. All too often we elect people to office who have little or no understanding of problem solving and decision making. They are frequently unable to think in multiple directions at the same time and routinely fail to take into consideration the plethora of factors offered by others that might further explain the nuances of the problems we face. We appoint and elect people to higher office because of their name recognition, rather than their skill at building consensus based on the comprehensive analyses of the factors that actually influence outcomes. Simply because someone was a prosecutor doesn't mean that they understand the complexities associated with critical thinking and advanced reasoning. Just because someone was successful in business doesn't equate to an aptitude for public policy, leadership, or effective governance. Just because someone has been in government for a long time, doesn't mean they are any good at it. It's an entirely different skill set.

I suspect that there is no resolution to this problem within our immediate future, but there is a correct answer and it involves a change in perspective that focuses on the illumination of the grand equations. In other words, if we stop treating things as simple and recognize that almost everything is complex, even the color of the grass, then we can channel our energies toward understanding all of the factors that combine to influence the outcome, whether it be healthcare, crime control, recidivism, quality of life for our citizens, the de-escalation of global tensions, the environment, sustainable energy policies, or the myriad of other issues that face our society. Imagine how our public discourse might change if we did nothing more that construct graphical illustrations of our three dimensional logic. Imagine how successful we might become if we actually took steps to retain experts to support our efforts by doing the analysis ahead of our formulation of judgments. That would change the paradigm of governance.

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It is reasonable to assume that public opinion regarding the effectiveness of our nation's leaders would change dramatically based on a shift in the political paradigm away from rhetoric and partisanship to a more green grass strategy. Public policy, leadership, and governance are most assuredly interrelated. Knowing how to construct an investigative process to uncover the truth about a situation is by far, in my judgment, the most important quality of someone endeavoring to be a public policy leader. Just because someone has an opinion about an issue doesn't mean that they are correct, despite their conviction or sense of self-importance. Knowing how to construct complex logic models, thinking on a higher plane, listening to the input provided by others, analyzing the data, building consensus based on a reasoned approach, and offering scientific evidence in support of your conclusions which served as the basis for your public policy strategy. Now that's impressive.

A return to statesmanship, as opposed to what we see happening today, must involve a dispassionate level of debate about the issues at work in the equation and the potential courses of action necessary to address the problem, which were derived from a comprehensive level of analysis. It cannot be predicated upon partisan politics, special interests, dogma, and rhetoric. Ernest discussion about whether one variable demonstrates more influence than another over the outcome, and whether that variable is primary, secondary, or tertiary in its level of influence needs to be the focus of our public discourse. Once the truth is known about the complexity of the situation then, and only then, can we engage in a public debate over the actions we need to take relative to attaining our goals or mitigating our problems.

There are limitless possibilities for cooperation, achievement, and empowerment of our nation and form of government if, and only if, we abandon the partisan politics of the present in favor a more reasoned approach. The challenges we face are incredibly complex and contain dozens of variables in all directions. We simply choose to make them appear simple and as a result, we focus our debates on things that don't really matter. The example I used to establish the framework of the green grass strategy were over simplified to further your level of understanding. There are (literally) dozens more variables that we could have included in our example. If there are that many factors that affect the color of grass, just imagine how extremely complicated our real world problems actually are and how often we overlook the vast majority of factors that are directly relevant to achieving success in our public policy formulation.

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