

Dominant public perceptions of government undermine efforts to engage citizens in the day-to-day work of the public sector and the many challenges, decisions and competing priorities that face our public systems. However, it is possible to create a more productive conversation about government if we can reconnect people to its unique mission, purpose and role. To do so we must understand the default mindsets we face and tap into alternative and more supportive public perspectives.

The Challenge

- Most Americans only dimly understand government and how it works. Top of mind images are mostly negative.
- Two dominant stereotypes and a stance toward government distort thinking:



- **Government as Political Theater** - mere partisan squabbling, a spectator sport, "nothing to do with me."
- **The Blurry Bureaucratic Blob** - wasteful and inefficient, causing more problems than it solves.
- **Government as Vending Machine** – a "consumer stance" that narrows our relationship with government to a transactional one. This "what's in it for me" perspective undermines the civic mindedness that we need.

Implications:

- Once triggered, these dominant perceptions short-circuit more pragmatic considerations of government and its role.
- Any policy or program initiative that requires an active governmental role is inherently suspect.
- Debates about public initiatives and how to pay for them are poisoned before they begin.

The Antidotes



- **Mission and Purpose** – the unique and fundamental value of government, the common good and public purposes for which it exists.
- **Concrete and Vivid Images** of the public systems and structures that are the foundation of our society.
- **Citizen-Manager Thinking** – “We” are the caretakers and managers of the public systems and structures that we have created and benefit from, responsible management and stewardship are essential.

Making the Case:

- Elevate discussions about public sector priorities to the unique mission and value of government. Focus on partnership, consensus-building and problem-solving.
- Help people remember the decades of investment in the many and varied public systems and structures that create community wellbeing.
- Beware of triggering Consumer Thinking that reduces any consideration of government action to “what is it going to cost me?” Elevate Citizen Thinking - “what do we need to get done for the good of our communities?”
- Find practical ways to make governmental functions more inviting, transparent and responsive to citizen involvement.

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