

Leaving a Leadership Legacy

It is time for public employees and their agencies to regain the community trust and spirit that once were the most fundamental elements of public service.

John Luthy

Some years ago, an assistant state personnel director told me that, before taking the state position, he had interviewed with a Fortune 500 company for a human resources position. Because this man was a young Harvard MBA, I automatically assumed he had vigorously pursued the corporate position.

As it turned out, he was offered the position but turned it down to take the state job. I was surprised. I had assumed that the corporate world would be his career choice. When asked why he had made his choice, he replied, "The corporate guys were so self-important and focused on making money. They had no concept of service, the community, or people in need. I felt they were incredibly self-centered and narrow in their view of the world."

When asked if he regretted the decision, he made a reply that has remained with me for more than 20 years: "The public sector is about service. It is about community and making a difference. I would rather work for state or local government and make a real contribution to my community than make gobs of money working for a corporation that has no understanding of the various elements of its own community. I made the right decision."

The Danger of Distrust

As yet another public manager has told me, "People in the public sector always get a bad rap . . . I just don't understand why society has to beat up on public employees—they are the best!" But, sadly, examples abound of distrust of government. After years of wrangling about the need for a new courthouse in Ada County, Idaho, ground finally has been broken to build it. For close to 15 years, discussion had flourished about the need for a new county courthouse, with the overwhelming view being that the situation was desperate.

Local taxpayer-protection organizations consistently argued that a new courthouse would increase taxes, even when told there were private/public partnerships that could avoid any new taxes dedicated to the courthouse. Virtually every facet of the community had joined in a collaborative effort to plan the facility and work out sensible funding. Through open and innovative partnerships, the \$60 million project had been planned and appeared finally to be under way in 1998.

But local taxpayer watchdogs filed a lawsuit declaring that the funding was illegal and effectively stalled the project for a year. They couldn't believe that the government wasn't doing something wrong that would hurt citizens, even when close to 70 percent of the public supported the project.

The court ruled, however, that the innovative funding was legal. Through the efforts of dedicated public employees and supportive local organizations, sensible and creative new avenues were found to accomplish the project without any negative fiscal impact on the public. Unfortunately, the delay caused by the lawsuit will increase the project's total cost by more than \$5 million because of the increase in interest rates.

Why is there such distrust of dedicated, professional people who have committed their working lives to the public good? The above example shows a fine private/public partnership. It is an in-

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stance of collaborative leadership among city, county, and state governments, not to mention throughout the business and financial communities. Structured by thoughtful, prudent people for the public good, this project will epitomize the word "community." It will be an important legacy for the entire population.

In many ways, the concept of "legacy" is one of celebration. It celebrates the public spirit while offering new applications for public leaders. It is about contribution and leaving behind something meaningful and worthwhile. There must be purpose, and often, it is the value, or vision, behind the purpose that provides the energy to carry on. Questions need to be raised, regardless of a community member's vocation or sector: Where are we going with all this? What are we trying to accomplish? What good will it do? What forces are encouraging us to pursue this course of action? What are the positives, and do they outweigh the negatives? What will ultimately be left behind for those who come after us?

What exactly is this concept of legacy as it applies to public managers and employees? Simply stated, a positive legacy is the inheritance (left by a task or action undertaken by a public employee) that has its roots in a public or community need and that makes a meaningful contribution, no matter how small. The concern lies in considering how large a ripple will be left in the pond, and

whether it will have a positive or negative effect. Every activity must have a purpose, and it must leave the desired mark on the constituency, environment infrastructure, or collective consciousness of the community.

What Should Be Explored

An exploration of the state of the public sector and its leadership is needed, to garner collective opinions and insights on both the positives and negatives that seem to follow on the acts of public leaders. And it should be noted that *all* local government managers, elected officials, department directors, section supervisors, and so on are potential public leaders. It is not possible to single out certain job descriptions or titles and consider these as the leaders when, ideally, so many decisionmakers exist at so many levels of government.

Perhaps more critically, each employee can be a leader. In his or her own way, each employee can make decisions regarding quality, performance, and service in every aspect of his or her workday. Front-line employees are closest to the community and seem to know what is the most sensible approach. Is this so strange a concept? Why is it so hard to fathom that people in general have so much talent, ability, and inherent worth?

A fundamental lesson of diversity is that leadership is found everywhere. Even when left formally unnurtured, leadership talent prospers in work teams and within every organization. But there must be a basic belief in people and in the richness they bring to every job. As Max DePree writes in his insightful book *Leadership Is an Art* "Understanding and accepting diversity enables us to see that each of us is needed. It also enables us to begin thinking about being abandoned to the strengths of others, of admitting that we cannot know or do everything."

A Legacy of Eight

Eight legacies seem to be essential to redirecting the efforts of public man-

agers at all levels. Six are internal and relate to organizational health, productivity, efficiency, and harmony. Two are external, focusing directly on the kind of community that citizens want to develop and leave for their children. External legacies deal with the overall connectivity that exists in the community and the type of spirit and collective culture that characterizes fruitful interaction.

The concept of a meaningful contribution or legacy must relate to building public organizations that show initiative and that possess spirit, power, and momentum. The greatest contribution is one that passes something meaningful onto the next generation while creating or enhancing a work environment that is both highly productive and harmonious. But a sense of legacy must be promoted both in the internal and external worlds, encouraging local government managers to consider the organization and its impacts on the community.

Here are some descriptions of these eight desired legacies.

1. Creating a collaborative culture.

The willingness and ability of employees to collaborate, both within the organization and with others outside it, is essential for short- and long-term success. Public organizations have become categorized and isolated, creating a balkanized culture that fractures rather than consolidates the best in each independent agency culture.

A challenge to collaboration is the problem of poorly connected agency cultures and how to help managers build stronger, more cooperative organizations. Such collaboration is intra- and interagency, involving not only public entities but also private and voluntary organizations with which they must actively participate to deliver programs and services.

2. Establishing a culture of planners. In his 1994 book *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning*, Henry Mintzberg argues that traditional strategic planning is no longer a critical aspect of business

and may even be detrimental. This is true, but only in the private sector.

One of Mintzberg's basic premises is that, because the pace of innovation and rapidly shifting markets require business to be incredibly responsive, old-style strategic planning that looks at the long term no longer fits the current mode of thinking. Planning for business must be "virtual," seeking an immediate response to changing circumstances, before market connectivity can be lost.

A related premise is the concept that the practice of traditional planning often is the very factor that inhibits employees from acting as progressive change agents. Traditional planning's structure and process were counterproductive for collaborative efforts and certainly did nothing to foster inclusion within an organization.

While these concerns about strategic planning are true in business, they do not apply nearly as well to government. While some observers complain that government is too slow and unresponsive to change, it also must be said that people depend on government to maintain a stable and dependable framework for society.

However, local, state, and federal governments—though reasonably responsive and progressive—also must have long-range plans in place for virtually every element of every agency. In other words, strategic planning is more important than ever for government. The challenges are enlisting employees at all levels to be strategic thinkers and planners, using the full range of their skills in the implementation process.

3. Building learning organizations.

Much has been written about the value of creating organizations that constantly improve and develop. By their very nature, public agencies are rooted in past policy and process, perhaps even mired in antiquated procedure. Future success will depend on a manager's ability to build continuous improvement into government, as is being done in American business.

Though belonging to a significantly different evolutionary branch of organizational theory, the public sector can learn the same lesson being learned in the private sector. Organizations that seek improvement at all levels will have more initiative, creativity, spirit, ability to collaborate, productivity, and quality rather than those that remain static. Although guided by Peter Senge's work at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, as published in *The Fifth Discipline*, this exciting principle has unfortunately not been promoted in the public sector; nor is it being actively introduced.

4. Developing employees to their full potential.

Instead of employee evaluations, I favor a process of employee development and of improvement based on the principal managerial role's not being one of telling people what to do, checking their work, and constantly reviewing their performance. On the contrary, the best managers and leaders are teachers, guides, mentors, encouragers, and role models.

In a learning culture, the purpose of annual reviews is to encourage and guide improvement throughout the organization. Employees may feel, of course, that the evaluation process is punitive and negative, rather than positive and helpful. But there are new processes of employee development that will enable managers to correct problems, to provide guidance and encouragement, and to change the entire process into one that celebrates progress and achievement.

I believe this is one of the most important legacies leaders can leave to either their employees or their organizations. Developing employees to their highest potential is the critical precursor to developing a high-quality, progressive organization. Done properly, it can alter the culture and provide an entirely new energy source.

5. Building confident, spirited organizations. One of the oldest rules of raising children is that children "learn

what they live." Given that all employees are "big kids," they, too, learn what they live. The literature abounds with examples of private companies that have developed the kind of spirited, confident cultures that promote good will, nurture initiative, and foster exceptional productivity. It is possible to generate such a culture in public agencies because incredible changes can take place in a workforce after a new, excited, and visionary leader replaces one who lacks these attributes.

Organizational strength and character come in part from having a proactive as opposed to a reactive attitude, yet government agencies continue to perpetuate a reactive culture. Both in spirit and in operating practice, public agencies have hunkered down, afraid to do what is right for their constituents. While the business sector is driven by the promise of financial reward, government has no such incentive to do good. Rather, public leaders and their organizations do what they must to survive from budget to budget.

A variety of circumstances has produced such a bunker mentality among public managers, and these managers must courageously explore and understand their origins and impacts. A spirited, can-do organization will generate more good will, productivity, and initiative than one driven by fear and harboring a restrictive vision of the future. Using remedies to turn around negative feelings and to develop a positive, high-spirited workforce is a method that can succeed in the face of existing and emerging challenges.

6. Inspiring pride and community connectivity. A degree of melancholy can accompany retirement from public service after many years. After years of hard work and sacrifice to teach, build roads, collect taxes, provide safe housing, and protect the public health, there is no recognition for a manager's contribution. But the enormous pride these people have felt in being or having been public servants still is apparent.

It is this pride that must be encour-

aged and infused into every element and level of public agencies. Again, it is the meaningfulness of the work that is important. We must learn to celebrate public work and accomplishment and to inspire entirely new levels of pride in our public servants, from elected officials to seasonal laborers who help maintain the beauty of our communities.

About a year ago, I had the pleasure of hearing a Tom Peters lecture. Several things he said made sense, but one item stood out. His suggestion was to encourage every employee to be a Michelangelo and to treat every job as if it were a work of art. Even if it is building a new softball field, laying asphalt, teaching a class, or issuing new license plates, employees should do their jobs with virtuosity and pride.

7. Reconnecting with the community. The morale in public agencies can be low. Employees feel pressed, unappreciated, maligned, and held in low regard. The leader's work must celebrate the joy of being in a position to contribute to the community. Well-conceived programs to ensure community connectivity will provide managers and leaders with specific guidance and with suggested actions to develop employee pride and confidence. By emphasizing both celebration and practical application, a new focus on this reconnection will provide an uplifting and powerful message to localities.

Fifty years ago, government seemed to be more connected to the community than it is today. Discussions with retired public employees confirm that they were held in higher regard than their modern counterparts. Thirty years ago, teachers were held in high esteem, along with local government employees. Now, government seems more and more monolithic and impenetrable to the average citizen as public employees retreat behind policy and procedure and drift away from the concept and culture of service.

There needs to be an effort within public agencies to reconnect with citizens. One such effort can be community policing, which is popular and has made



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enormous strides toward reconnecting law enforcement agencies with citizens and reducing crime.

8. Arousing a progressive community spirit. The second external legacy I wish to suggest promotes the belief that the new public leader must be responsible for developing a stronger, more progressive community spirit. There also must be a greater understanding of the damage that has been done to community spirit and to the ways in which it is being reborn across the country.

The essential element in this rebirth is an expanded view of public leadership. Public officials or managers at every level must understand that it is their responsibility to build the community, to contribute to it, and to help it achieve a positive, progressive spirit. What a tremendous legacy to leave after years of public service—a truly progressive and harmonious community!

There is a rationale for this particular desired legacy, beyond the specific actions and behaviors that can be used immediately by local government managers and elected officials. In many ways, this legacy also celebrates the spirit of the national community, though in a manner that directs, encourages, and helps managers to understand why their contributions are so critical to the long-term vitality of the country as a whole.

The Beauty of Good Connections

There is a distinctive beauty to the holistic nature of the global village. We are connected, whether we wish to be or not, and we have begun to integrate more vigorously into one world culture.

Of all our institutions, government is perhaps the most provocative, in that it alone can serve its citizens while simultaneously being maligned and modified

by them. Though appearing in many forms, government is the most important institution of any society, and, even if imperfect, it holds the promise of a future characterized by stability, peace, social and physical well-being, and long-term economic prosperity.

While this article tends to emphasize the American system of government, the principles offered here apply to every form of government and to every type of public institution. Leadership is not inextricably tied to national labels, nor does the need for it reside in one country more than in another. There are differences in style and effect, but the need for stronger, more humanistic, and more meaningful leadership is found in every country. **DM**

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