



SENIOR EXECUTIVES ASSOCIATION
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT LEAGUE

REFLECTIONS
OF
PRESIDENTIAL DISTINGUISHED
RANK EXECUTIVES

IN COOPERATION WITH
EXECUTIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS
JOHN F. KENNEDY SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

REFLECTIONS

OF
PRESIDENTIAL DISTINGUISHED
RANK EXECUTIVES

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The Senior Executives Association (SEA) was incorporated in 1980 as a tax-exempt, non-profit professional association representing the interests of career federal executives and committed to effective, efficient and productive leadership in government. SEA seeks to ensure equitable treatment and compensation, continuing professional education, and recognition for the more than 6,000 career federal executives who comprise the nation's highest civil service ranks.

The SEA Professional Development League (PDL), founded in 1981, is a non-profit educational organization which is committed to advancing the professionalism of career federal executives through the sponsorship of training and recognition activities and research. All PDL activities are open to all career federal executives, irrespective of whether they hold membership in SEA.

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INTRODUCTION

The Senior Executive Service, established by the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 to “ensure that the executive management of the Government of the United States is responsive to the needs, policies, and goals of the Nation and otherwise is of the highest quality” (5 U.S.C. 3131), consists of managerial, supervisory, and policy-making positions at the highest levels of the federal government. The objectives of the SES system are: to provide greater authority to agencies in managing their executive resources; to attract and retain highly competent executives, and to assign them where they will be most effective in accomplishing the agency’s mission and where best use will be made of their talents; to provide for the development of managers and executives; to hold executives accountable for individual and organizational performance; to reward the outstanding performers and remove the poor performers; and to provide for an executive merit system free of prohibited personnel practices and arbitrary actions.

In 1980, the Senior Executives Association was formed to improve the federal government’s efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity; to advance the professionalism and advocate the interests of career federal executives; and to enhance public recognition of executives’ contributions. By 1981, SEA’s founders recognized that special attention had to be focused on promoting executive education and heightening public awareness of federal executives’ achievements. As a result, SEA created the Professional Development League. PDL sponsors training events, communications activities and research programs designed to advance federal executive professionalism and enhance public recognition of career executives’ accomplishments.

There is no more revered accomplishment for a career federal

executive than achieving the Presidential Rank of Distinguished Executive. Annually, a maximum of one percent of SES members are eligible for this pinnacle of executive achievement.

At the beginning of each fiscal year, the Office of Personnel Management requests that agencies nominate individuals for their “sustained extraordinary accomplishment.” (The second Presidential Rank – Meritorious Executive – is awarded for “sustained accomplishment” and limited to five percent of the SES.) Following the receipt of nominations, the Director of OPM, with the aid of representatives from private-sector corporations, academic institutions, and public interest groups, conducts a lengthy and stringent review of the nominees. This panel forwards their recommendations to the President, who makes the final selection. A monetary award (currently 35% of base pay) is given in recognition of the Rank, as well as a gold pin and certificate signed by the President.

Distinguished Executives are also honored at an annual black-tie banquet hosted by SEA PDL, with the cooperation of the Department of State and the Office of Personnel Management. Since 1986, SEA PDL has hosted the banquet at the United States Department of State Diplomatic Reception Rooms amid priceless early American antiques, furniture, and paintings with a majestic view of Washington. In celebrating the exceptional achievements of the winners of the Presidential Distinguished Rank Award, PDL recognizes the contributions of the entire SES.

After years of hosting this annual banquet, SEA PDL realized that, while the Rank Award winners are publicly recognized at the event, they had never been brought together to reflect upon their careers and experiences. On the morning following the 1997 banquet, SEA PDL, in partnership with Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, held the first annual “Morning of Reflections.” In contrast to the celebratory nature of the banquet, the Morning of Reflections was convened for the purpose of permitting the Rank Award winners to consider the challenges to and experiences of career executives in an

environment of downsizing, cost-cutting, and reinvention.

The event has continued annually (with different topics each year) since the first gathering, and in 1999, “Reflections,” a monograph detailing the first two Mornings of Reflection, was published.

This publication chronicles the four subsequent gatherings and the insights offered by all in attendance.

THE THIRD MORNING OF REFLECTIONS

*True Leadership – What It Means,
What It Requires, and
What It Confronts*

April 30, 1999

The Morning of Reflections was held on the morning after the Professional Development League's annual banquet to honor those awarded the rank of Distinguished Executive in 1998. While the event is always stunning in its grace, precision, and moving sense of patriotism, this particular evening was highlighted by the eloquent keynote speech of then-Secretary of the Navy, Richard Danzig.

Danzig powerfully articulated the accomplishments of several executives being honored and the importance of the Senior Executive Service corps at large. Vigorously touting the significance of career federal executives to the continued triumphs of "the world's most powerful nation," Danzig imparted a challenge to those same executives – do not maintain the status quo, however great that may be. Rather, he challenged the executives to use everything they have, to take risks until they feel "precariously vulnerable," to unite as a group, and to surge forward as public servants . . . and as *leaders* of public servants.

It was from Danzig's stirring words that Peter Zimmerman, senior associate dean at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and annual moderator of the Morning of Reflections, directed the 1999 Morning session's focus on leadership.

“You think you’re at the edge of the envelope? There’s another even bigger envelope out there. You think you’re coming to the top of the hill? No, it’s two hills beyond that you’ve got to climb.”

Zimmerman’s summation of Danzig’s challenge was an effective springboard for the day’s discussion of leadership in today’s government. Noting Danzig’s view that leaders should consistently expand their horizons, their relationships, and their learning, Zimmerman quoted from a speech that President Kennedy was scheduled to deliver in Dallas, Texas on November 22, 1963 – “Leadership and learning are indispensable to one another.”

Zimmerman led the Distinguished Executives in a discussion of what they have learned as leaders, challenges they have faced, and changes they have made to reach this point in their careers. In effect, they offered their own personal ingredients for a leadership and learning recipe.

Quoting Machiavelli, Zimmerman pointed out that being a leader in times of change is delicate, dangerous, and uncertain in its success. Yet, as career federal executives, it is also inevitable. Do executives take the academician’s route and analyze the unavoidable problems? Or do they fall into the common trap of thinking that any new conflict or issue is just a rehash of one that they have seen before? As one executive stated, “We don’t have to do a lot of analysis. We don’t have time to do a lot of thinking. We just do.” This narrowing of vision is understandable in the fast-paced world of career executives, who must learn to be decisive and intuitive. However, it is easy to start failing to recognize unique or changing circumstances and become comfortable with the thought that “you have it all figured out.” In effect, the seeds of potential failures sit within the knowledge and skills that has contributed to your success.

All learning is anchored in our experience. When we encounter new situations, people and problems, we begin to make sense of them by connecting the novel to the familiar.

We see the new in relation to what we already know, where we’ve been, and all facets of our prior experience. In so doing there is the

danger that we may give more weight to the familiar attributes or characteristics, and insufficient attention to the differences.

“Been there, done that” goes the familiar phrase, although it is never true in a literal sense. Recognizing the turbulent world of career executives and the tendency of individuals to fit the events of the new day into yesterday’s lessons, Zimmerman asked the attendees to consider characteristics of effective leadership and how leaders facilitate their learning and that of others.

“I think most of us have gotten to where we are because, at some point in our careers, we were much more radical thinkers than others.”

One Distinguished Executive noted that recognizing an emerging issue and seeking others’ experiences and viewpoints is a critical element to successful leadership. While agreeing, Zimmerman asked whether the culture of (his) organization welcomed alternative viewpoints and emerging ideas in their field and in their particular agency. Behavioral norms and the informal social structure may determine whether it’s organizationally acceptable to seek out perspectives, thoughts and ideas from elsewhere.

Organizations are often locked in to a settled way of viewing the world, and initially they may they misread and misinterpret new developments.

One of the challenges of leadership is to see things as they are, not as others would have them be. How can you ensure a climate and culture that is open to new ideas, new events, new threats, new opportunities? Is there a place in your agency for the divergent thinker, or for the organizational maverick? Do you seek out diverse points of view with regularity? How can leaders model an orientation toward constant learning in their own behavior? And how do we design our organizational processes, systems and culture in ways that promotes learning throughout the agency?

This prompted one executive to say, “I think most of us have gotten to where we are because, at some point in our careers, we were much more radical thinkers than others.” He added that not only must he continue to think “radically”, but he must also listen to the other real radicals in his agency. Agreeing, another executive said that it is important to “recognize better ideas that come from below and to notice people with focus, talent, and newness who come up with a good idea.” Zimmerman concurred, noting that it is important as leaders not to “pigeonhole” others within your organization. In other words, if a person develops a reputation as someone with different and radical ideas, it is vital not to automatically dismiss each idea without considering its merits.

Expanding upon the notion of encouraging such “idea” persons, one executive said, “You need to allow room for the questioners in your organization, too. As a leader, if you recognize and accept that it’s okay to ask questions of the idea people, you get more interaction throughout your whole community.” This important distinction was characterized as “creating space” by Zimmerman, for, by “creating space” in organizational communications (as well as your own internal thoughts), what might be perceived as deviant or radical are, in fact, new and intriguing possibilities or interpretations.

On the other hand, several executives noted that, in their organizations, “radical thinkers tend to be marginalized” and one’s radical ideas must be hidden from plain view.

However, the general consensus of the gathering was that radical thinking (and questioning) should be treasured and rewarded within most agencies. As leaders within those organizations, a keen ability to “take those radical ideas that are barely within the margins and incorporate them into the agencies’ growth” is a significant talent to possess.

While experience is our greatest asset, one can be over-reliant upon what worked in the past. Zimmerman noted that the spirit behind leadership is often the ability to “guide people down an uncertain path toward uncertain goals.” As career federal executives, the mandate is

sometimes unclear. Sometimes even the authority is unclear. In these cases, executives must tease out operational goals and facilitate learning within the organization while steering others from the trap of thinking an issue is déjà vu.

Drawing on this thought, one executive recalled an instance within his organization that required enormously different subcultures – such as budgetary, political, and technological groups – to convene, understand, and agree on a program. After much time spent getting nowhere, one individual stepped forward into a leadership role and recognized that the messages must be tailored to each group. Different models would have to be developed, and those involved should not be persuaded or cajoled into thinking one particular way; rather, the aim was to “shift the locus of conversation to your audience’s strengths” . . . whether they are budget analysts, policy analysts, scientists or a mixture of all three. In this case, an executive assuming a role akin to an outside consultant or facilitator served as the guiding light in a successful project.

Another method to facilitate learning within your organization (or to outside constituents) is to emphasize what the consequences of actions might be. This can be fortified by using stark visual images, clear and expressive data, or establishing respected allies outside the immediate organization. These elements not only facilitate the necessary learning, but establish a legitimacy and validation to the line of reasoning.

One executive shared how his agency is really in stark opposition within itself because the goals of one part of the agency clash with the goals of another branch. While accepting that actuality, the executive observed that “his side” of the agency was operating at a budgetary disadvantage due to lack of understanding from “the other side.” Eventually, he and his colleagues “found executives in other agencies that had the ability to help. With careful planning, careful integration, and joint movement by several agencies . . . the problems were addressed without any noticeable harm within the home agency.” This “success has a thousand fathers” illustration came as a result of accepting, even pursuing, help from other agencies. Executives from several agencies

“avoided the convenience of saying no” to helping others across agency lines and stepped up to further the cause of good government.

As the morning wound to a close, one executive noted that, in the federal government and in public service as a whole, “the chaos and bedlam is forever, but the different role that a leader plays is as a creator of better processes and better technology.” All successful leaders face challenges. But to overcome them and to accomplish one’s goals, individuals must consciously elude narrowing their vision and shortcutting to familiar solutions. Recognizing the different cultures within

“ The chaos and bedlam is forever, but the different role that a leader plays is as a creator of better processes and better technology.”

organizations – a critical element to settling conflicts and achieving the efficient flow of information – can alleviate this. In some organizations, the generational divide provides a means to challenge conventional thinking. Executives should strive to incorporate the “next generation” into policy debates as they can serve as an important counterbalance to the “leveling off” that seasoned executives sometimes face.

However, being certain to note the accomplishments of those in the room and career Senior Executives throughout government, Zimmerman closed with a quote from Nelson Mandela: “Our greatest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be?”

Leadership in government requires a constant struggle to push forward in a fast changing world, to break free of settled “wisdom” of past successes, which may in fact be just the tired assumptions of past campaigns, less relevant and applicable to today’s problems. As both Secretary Danzig and Zimmerman stressed, effective leadership depends on constant learning, adaptation and growth.

THE FOURTH MORNING OF REFLECTIONS

Transitions

April 14, 2000

With the inauguration of a new Administration just a little over a year earlier, the fourth annual session of the Morning of Reflections focused on transitions and the role of career federal executives during such times. Leadership, as Peter Zimmerman characterized it, includes helping people to learn and adapt to changing ways. These times of change, or transitions, are frequently challenging times, but also opportunities for leaders to exercise certain skills – skills that Zimmerman hoped to elicit and illuminate with the help of the attendees.

To launch the discussion, Zimmerman recalled a few benchmark Presidential transitions from the past. These transitions were points of reference because they provided good illustrations of the problems and opportunities in transition. In 1933, President Roosevelt became the last President to be inaugurated in March because the time between his election in November and his swearing in ceremony witnessed the total collapse of the American banking system. As a result, future inauguration ceremonies were moved up to January, only eleven weeks after the election.

Another key transition was the Kennedy Administration. The Bay of Pigs, for which initial planning began under the Eisenhower Administration, was launched shortly after Kennedy took office. This unmitigated disaster made Kennedy appear weak and even foolish to some. In fact, some theorize that Kennedy's commitment to put American

combat troops in Vietnam in early 1963 was a response to the Bay of Pigs fiasco. This international incident prompted much public discussion about transitions and ultimately, Kennedy advocated (and Congress appropriated) some money for Presidential transitions.

Each successive administration seems to take longer to get its team in place. In the Clinton Administration a few early appointees had left before all the PAS positions had been filled. In effect, a President's complete team is rarely in place at any given agency.

“Every transition eventually becomes a transformation. It moves from initial distrust from the political appointee to eventually saying, ‘civil servants are great. Their contribution is invaluable and I didn’t realize it when I walked in.’”

With this background in place, the focal point of the day became the determination of the effect of such problems on the permanent government and the consequences for citizens, who depend upon that government everyday.

Several executives related how they have been “tarred by the past,” that is, viewed as part of and/or loyal to the old administration. After working closely with an Administration on a day-by-day basis and developing an understanding of appointees’ viewpoints, executives often become seen as linked to that political party. Further, if a program is closely associated to a partisan agenda, those executives face an even tougher challenge because they are marginalized by the incoming Administration.

Certain Administrations have been more difficult to work with than others. For example, a few executives recalled how the Reagan Administration was particularly skeptical toward careerists. In fact, some advisors during that time recommended that political appointees try to shield themselves from career executives.

One executive noted that such early transition challenges are

exacerbated if the timing corresponds with critical budget work. However, he went on to relate how this forced appointees to come in and engage the careerists early on, and he observed that this quick interaction could be a positive development in their relationships.

Another executive said that, in his experiences, “every transition eventually becomes a transformation. It moves from initial distrust from the political appointee to eventually saying, ‘civil servants are great. Their contribution is invaluable and I didn’t realize it when I walked in’”. While the amount of time this “transformation” requires varies by individual and administration, he agreed that the quicker you work together, the quicker the transformation takes place.

Zimmerman noted how the structural changes of the transition process, and particularly the cumbersome appointment process, may actually be working to the advantage of careerists, in that appointees are forced to turn to them for help. As one executive put it, “we came together as a team quickly and shortened the transition because everyone had to hit the ground running.”

Personal style can reflect how individuals initially relate to career executives. One attendee said that one appointee arrived, “put a pencil on his desk and asked, ‘okay, who is on my staff?’ Others come in with a personal cadre of close advisors.”

Like any relationship, the early days, weeks and months of working with a new Administration are critical because first impressions are significant. One executive said that, when there is a turnover in Administrations, he is reluctant to appear too active in the early days because this seems to signal that you are “part of the previous Administration, and you’ll face retribution.”

In agreeing, another attendee related the frustration of “investing four or five years in a major program or policy and then suddenly not seeing it to fruition.” It can be a real “catch-22” situation when deciding whether to push forward on a program with the new appointees or to lay back and let things play out. Another executive added, “we have a whole staff that have been working on things, been committed to them

for a long time and if we, as leaders, suddenly become cautionary about pushing for them – you lose their support.” Another observed that it is frustrating to have to “re-prove or reinvent ourselves over and over – each time a new party takes over.”

One executive recalled an especially positive transition at his agency some time ago. As the new leadership came in, the staff was asked to recommend career civil servants, both from headquarters and in the field, to come in and help with the transition. By actively pursuing

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input from the field in terms of general direction, the new appointee assured that the global focus of the agency was clear and consistent. In fact, “some of those people that participated in this overall design were moved into leadership positions.”

Zimmerman asked about the expected duties of career executives during a transition. There was near consensus that one of the chief obligations is to the career

staff. One executive termed it, “insulating them from too much politics.” Another said, “to help the staff understand the new policy directions,” but, most importantly, to “keep them focused and reassure them the overall agenda is still important.” Zimmerman summed it up – serving as “a buffer, insulation, reassurance, and to some extent, protection,” that is, helping the staff members see past all the static and noise in the system and stay focused on the big picture.

One executive expanded on this, saying, “Stabilization is the fundamental responsibility.” That is, regardless of certain policy shifts, the executive must ensure that overriding agency objectives are maintained. Salesmanship – of a sort – is also a responsibility, said one executive. You take the initiative to “make sure the incoming director can appreciate that there is a history, a continuity in place. There is a good team here.”

The conversation then turned to focus on the responsibilities careerists have to the incoming appointee. Some felt a duty to determine the appointee’s agenda early on and present viable options for reaching those two or three critical policy goals that are crucial to the “new agenda”.

“Yes,” agreed one executive. “We should try to give them an opportunity to change some things that are in some ways easy to change, but don’t wreck programs.” These early “wins” and keeping the incoming leadership aware of looming issues of sensitive timing or urgency are important to building trust as well as the health of the agency as a whole.

Finally, Zimmerman brought the discussion to a close by eliciting advice that careerists would offer to political appointees during a transition. Immediately, the group said the political leadership should fight the urge to come in with suspicious thoughts and not assume that civil servants are the handmaidens of the previous Administration.

Knowing that appointees come in with specific goals and agendas, one of the attendees suggested that politicians “come in asking, how do I get this done? Then, it is our responsibility to say, ‘okay, you can choose A, B, or C to get there.’” Along with that, the appointees must be willing to listen and ask questions of the careerists.

Several executives noted the importance of an Administration having their team in place early in the game. As Zimmerman said, “People have to precede policy. An awful lot of wheel spinning goes on until people are in place.” Until the Administration’s “movers and shakers” are identified, not much work can be accomplished during a transition.

In conclusion, transitions can truly be a time of opportunity – a chance to use the force of change to fuel organizational improvements. But most importantly, it is imperative to remember that it is ultimately the core responsibility of the career civil service to maintain the long-term capacity of the government, regardless of the political leadership in place. By keeping their eyes on the horizon, career executives can steer their agencies away from any temporary distractions.

THE FIFTH MORNING OF REFLECTIONS

Lessons Learned

April 27, 2001

Peter Zimmerman opened the fifth Morning of Reflections by recognizing the fact that those in attendance – Distinguished Rank Executives – were truly the best of the best. To achieve appointment to the Senior Executive Service is no small feat in and of itself, but to be honored as a Distinguished Rank Executive is truly extraordinary. As such, Zimmerman wanted to filter out what lessons these remarkable executives had to offer – what they learned in their early development, their continuing realizations as Senior Executives and the advice they might offer to future generations of Senior Executives . . . and to those political leaders who establish the agendas.

As in most discussions of executive development, the subject of mentors reared its head. In general, most attendees agreed that formal mentoring programs are ineffective and a waste of time. However, several noted the importance of informal mentors, that is, individuals whose actions and advice greatly influenced the development of the attendees.

One of the key lessons cultivated from these informal relationships was the importance of truth and honesty. As one executive put it, “the people I saw succeed when I was a GS-13 were those people who were unrelentingly honest about what they were doing.” Agreeing, Zimmerman called to mind the famous Mark Twain quote, “Always tell the truth. You will amaze your friends and confound your enemies.” In

the same vein, one executive said, “the people whom no one trusts in my organization are much less effective.” Added another, “I had role models based on what NOT to do, as well as what to do.” A caveat was offered, however – “When you see someone being successful, don’t just imitate. Look at yourself, who you are, and try to adapt the lessons you learn from others to work for you.”

For several executives, a key factor in their early development was the establishment of a network of peers – peers who developed as

individuals and potential leaders alongside each other. The mutual respect and values served as reinforcement for each as they grew into their jobs, serving as “guidance relationships amongst peers.”

Another attendee said she “learned early on that I could compete,” and people within the organization “encouraged me along the way.” These informal mentors offered her challenges that she almost felt were beyond her capabilities but, in the end, were not.

It was also a characteristic of her agency and of herself that “when people fail in an organization, it’s often because they simply can’t get along with others. I

don’t mean you have to compromise your principles, but try to be positive and bring a positive attitude to your job.”

The group as a whole, while supportive of mentors and peer support, cautioned that it is also important not to align oneself with anyone too closely – not only could this cause problems if your close confidante runs into peril, but you also must strive to prove that you can do the job on your own.

With that, the conversation went beyond lessons learned during development, to lessons learned while an executive, including a look to

“When you see someone being successful, don’t just imitate. Look at yourself, who you are, and try to adapt the lessons you learn from others to work for you.”

the future.

With the lure of public service eroding, one executive said he made an effort to “spend a fair amount of time with the new people in (his) office. I encourage the new charges to be intellectually curious about their work.” Zimmerman noted the importance of doing this, not only for the long term health of the government, but also because it is an opportunity to fundamentally change an agency and lay the foundation for the next generation of leadership.

As another perspective on this same point, a participant said that he felt involving himself with newcomers enables him to “surround myself with the right cast of characters and the right skills to make things happen.”

One executive noted the increasing difficulty of recruiting talent to the public sector. As a counterweight to the private sector, he thinks the government must try to “keep people by making the experience a good experience. Increase their professional satisfaction by giving them an opportunity to take on early responsibilities.”

Zimmerman characterized this as “not trying to train people how to do a job, but giving them a chance to actually do the job.” This part of the discussion mirrored the executive who recalled being challenged beyond what she thought were her capabilities. However, by raising the bar higher than individuals think they might be able to compete, it usually becomes evident that “most of our limitations are self-imposed.”

There are many examples of how setting a seemingly impossible objective brings out extraordinary accomplishment. In his well known speech at Rice University, President Kennedy pledged to send a man to the moon and return him safely to earth before the decade was out. Few thought it possible. The US space program was troubled. NASA

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hadn't yet been established. But career executives led an extraordinary effort that thrilled the world when it succeeded in the summer of 1969.

As part of building a capable team and challenging the novice executives, several attendees noted the importance of not "picking clones of yourself." The tendency to revert back to our own norms can lead an executive to not having enough people with unique skills or perspectives. As one participant quoted one of her agency leaders, "If you and I agree on everything, one of us is irrelevant." Falling into this trap can lead to same-world viewpoints that cripple an agency or program.

In discussing young leaders within agencies, the discussion expanded on the looming personnel crisis in government. An alarming percentage of current Senior Executives are about to become eligible for retirement; that may "include a disproportionate number of people that you'd like to have around to teach the next generation of executives."

More and more executives are being recruited from outside the public sector, which, if done selectively, may be productive, but if done en masse can constitute a devastating blow to those who have been waiting and working from inside for many, many years.

Those young people that do come into government often do not have the necessary ties to build long-term stability in the agency. Under the Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS), there is no real bond to the future of government, and many new Senior Executives are no longer willing to move multiple times within one agency. As one executive put it, "my career spanned 100 feet – I moved up and down the same hall."

In contrast, today's new executive recruit is looking at "a three to seven year window of public service," one attendee offered. A couple of suggestions offered to avoid these "short-term Senior Executives" were the pursuit of mid-career executives who have grown disenchanted with the private sector and want to reinvent themselves in the public sector and the hiring of new people at lower ranks so that they

can be promoted more often and more quickly, making them feel that they are, indeed, "going somewhere." It was also suggested that more agencies should use the tools available to them, such as retention bonuses, but it is usually fiscally impossible due to budget restraints.

Yet, with an inability to sell the salary benefits of a government job, the best tool may be selling the "program itself and the prestige of running it." One individual noted that senior government workers in Northern European countries often print their job title in the phone

“Senior government workers in Northern European countries often print their job title in the phone directories because of their pride in public service.”

directories because of their pride in public service. However, in the United States, the feelings toward government and public servants are frequently cynical or even hostile. One executive said, "I can remember two Presidents that have campaigned on the prestige and good will of public service. Everyone else has actually campaigned against the federal government." Another agreed, saying, "why should a brilliant student from Harvard go to the federal government and get beaten up as an idiot for taking a pay cut?" Even further, one attendee said an acquaintance actually asked him,

"What's a smart guy like you doing working for the federal government?"

These comments led to the final portion of the morning's discussion – the problems facing the Senior Executive Service and those that are looming.

One executive lamented the lack of project management skills in today's executives. Agreeing, one executive said she is forced to recruit executives earlier in their careers (in an attempt to balance the advantages of not losing valuable people just a few years after hiring them), but this leads to a dearth of true project management-type skills. This

deficiency is a “challenge to the fundamental nature of our relationship with our customers.”

Relating this to the coming retirement crisis, one executive said he is familiar with many individuals retiring from public service only to go to work for a “Beltway bandit that just wants someone that knows how to interact with the government.” Several attendees hoped that a number of retirees elect to come back and mentor the next generation, almost as a phased retirement policy.

“This inability to share functions forces agencies to constantly reinvent processes throughout government. Instead of developing government solutions, we’re developing agency solutions.”

The splintering of what was once a government-wide Senior Executive Service is another issue. Since the establishment of the SES in 1979, over twenty equivalent pay systems have evolved throughout the federal government. While driven by a desire for agency flexibilities (and, often, for higher pay structures), this fragmentation is inhibiting oversight and management of what should be a government-wide executive corps and may well hinder efforts to promote and utilize executive mobility.

Another issue of concern is the changing culture of organizations. The so-called “flat” organization takes away many learning opportunities for mid-level super-

visors. It also encourages the unwise use of technology, that is, too much email communication or the utilization of email for what should be formal communications. Many junior employees grow to expect more and more access to senior employees, access which can be overused and lead to a big consumption of time. The theory that “everyone is empowered can lead to some odd tensions.”

An additional point of concern was the number of contract employees in the federal government today. Several executives questioned

what is gained from hiring contractors and whether some of the work could not be completed from within. One executive said the “quality of work from some contractors is questionable, and we have to spend staff time cleaning it up.” This, in effect, defeats the purpose of contracting out, and he thought the public sector “could do a much better job in many instances if only given a few more resources to do the work ourselves.” There was also agreement that the skill to manage contracts is often lacking in government and this often leads to the contract failure.

The notion that the private sector is always better than the public sector is a flawed belief. As Zimmerman stated, “There is absolutely no evidence anywhere in the world, in the history of any country, that taking government out of the picture makes things universally and fundamentally better.” While everyone in attendance agreed that, for specific activities it is frequently true that the private sector is the best choice, but, when based solely as an attack on government service as a whole, the premise is simply wrong. It is not only wrong, but it creates long term morale problems within the government, which is, of course, ultimately self defeating.

Further issues were touched upon during the discussion, such as how to share resources and solutions throughout government. Regarding interagency relations, one executive said, “It seems that we’re more afraid of each other than we are willing to bargain with each other.” This inability to share functions forces agencies to constantly “reinvent processes throughout government. Instead of developing government solutions, we’re developing agency solutions.”

Another executive assessed the inherent weaknesses in always hiring the lowest bidder on contracts and in the time elapsed between the start and finish of projects, particularly in the ever-important information technology sector. If too much time elapses, the end product is already antiquated.

Some of the problems raised were simply rehashing worries from many, many years of evaluating public service. One issue about which there is no disagreement, however, is the problem of recruiting and

retaining public servants in general and career executives in particular.

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As one executive put it, “The challenge for us as leaders is to achieve the right balance of getting new blood into the organizations while giving those already there opportunities for advancement, which maintains the institutional knowledge that we already have.”

As for the role of the political management team, she astutely added, “Our leadership should spend some time understanding what we do and understanding the value we bring, and then communicate that to the general public, as opposed to saying negative things about what we don’t do.” Zimmerman concurred, bringing the morning to a close by noting the intrinsic value of simply being recognized and appreciated. These “supreme motivators” apply to most anyone, whatever their place in life.

THE SIXTH MORNING OF REFLECTIONS

Problems and Prescriptions

April 17, 2002

The sixth Morning of Reflections, in a new twist held the day before the PDL Banquet, was also the first one post-September 11, and Zimmerman opened the forum by relating the upsurge in “trust of government”. When queried if they “trust” the federal government, the percentage of the American public answering ‘yes’ had been continually spiraling down, reaching a low point of 17 percent after the Contract for America-led government shutdown in 1994.

Since then, the number steadily climbed and after September 11, it neared 60 percent – a real swing in attitude for the American public. Although this was a temporary spike, it built on a steady trend of increased trust in government and respect for public service. In some respects this may be an opportunity for public service. Public awareness, interest and appreciation for public service is higher than it has been in decades. With that in mind, what are the problems and issues with the system for developing and selecting our top government executives, i.e., the Senior Executive Service and what can be done to improve upon it?

The first topic was the problem of hiring and succession planning at the executive level. Several attendees expressed hope that the increased admiration for public servants might entice more able and talented young people to join the government. Zimmerman noted that the president of Harvard University has been quoted saying, “25,000

people made their way down the stairs at the World Trade Center on September 11. Public servants were the only ones going up.”

Yet, talented young people often choose the private sector over the public sector because they can “do” so many different things. However, they often do not realize the number of opportunities available in the federal government. As one executive noted, “I recently read that young people expect to have 12 jobs over the course of their careers. Well, I’ve had 12 different jobs in my agency. There are real opportunities to stay a long time and do a lot of different things.”

“(Political appointees) need to profoundly understand what’s going on. When they fail to do that, they don’t realize the consequences of the changes they impose.”

Another award winner noted that, despite it all, there is still a group of young people with a drive to serve and a desire to enter public service. As recruiters, per se, agencies must embrace them and pursue them because, if the government will supply a livable wage, they will take the intangible benefits they derive from serving to fulfill their careers.

Acting as a recruiter is something that agencies and those within agencies must endeavor to do more often. It is imperative as executives to keep an eye out for talented people and encourage those around them to do the same. Several

noted the lack of cohesion between agency development programs and agency selection processes – those talented people who are spotted must be funneled into the development programs. As Zimmerman said, “Keep an eye out for those ready to put themselves on the line, who should be a part of the future of the organization and turn that into almost a formal system of development.”

Of course, while this foresight is an admirable goal, agencies and individuals must also be wary of the perils of “pre-selection”. To avoid

that, the union of development and selection must be carefully cultivated and not give unbridled expectations. Also, the spirit of the process should be anticipatory and not reactive.

Zimmerman asked the attendees if the current system that is producing Senior Executives is an appropriate one for the future. There was definitive agreement that there was much to be desired from other systems. For example, private industry strives to infuse early management skill development, and the military tracks people for leadership careers by interspersing responsibilities with training. But, in the career executive system, there is little commitment to coaching and mentoring, let alone true development programs. One executive believes that, due to “continuous budget-cutting, more and more executives are forced to focus on substantive work rather than managerial skills.”

This, of course, led to a discussion of the failure of most political appointees to understand the basics of true career public service. Many come into the government ready to make sweeping reforms, but, as one executive said, “They need to profoundly understand what’s going on. When they fail to do that, they don’t realize the consequences of the changes they impose.” With the term of service for most political appointees only a few years, a worthy goal would be to strive to leave a legacy of restoring the civil service – not reforming it. In agreement, one executive related how an administrator in his agency had a favorite expression, “We suffer from pulling the plant out of the ground to see if the roots are growing.”

One attendee expressed his belief that career executives in the Department of Defense face a double layer of transitory employees, namely, both civilian appointees and military leadership. He termed the agency as “being run by temporary employees.” While acknowledging that the generals and admirals come and go just as political appointees do, Zimmerman pointed out that the military leaders bring a different perspective. They know that their successor will be a fellow officer and that their performance depends in part on the officers who preceded them. They have a real stake in nurturing and sustaining the long term

capacity of the government, in ways different from the political appointees. Most walk in the door with a strong orientation toward “taking care of the troops”. And, in many cases, the military leadership serve as a buffer between the political appointees and career executives, aiding in the information flow among the levels. There are also times when the military are valuable at mobilizing support (or opposition) for important (or destructive) initiatives coming from the political ranks.

“ . . . layers between the political decision makers and career executives. . . narrow the scope of action available to careerists, and erode your authority. And it significantly impedes the building of trust between the permanent service and the leadership.”

Zimmerman followed up by questioning the most unsuccessful suggestion of the original Volcker Commission (National Commission on the Public Service) – that there were too many political appointees in the federal government. Not only has that suggestion been ignored, but the trend has been in the opposite direction. There are more appointees with each successive administration, and this “builds layers between the political decision makers and career executives. It narrows the scope of action available to careerists, and it erodes your authority. And it significantly impedes the building of trust between the permanent service and the leadership.”

While everyone acknowledged that this is a problem, it is one that is not likely to be solved because it is obviously a political loser. (Notwithstanding the lack of success in implementing the recommenda-

tions of the first Volcker Commission, the second Volcker Commission report, issued in January 2003, put forth a similar recommendation).

What can be addressed, however, is the preparation and quality of those appointed to political leadership positions. Zimmerman related how, during the Reagan years, there was a commitment to orient new

appointees to what the career civil service was and what it could do for you. Turnover at the political level is an ongoing problem. Such orientation activities have to be timed right to be effective- early in appointees’ tenure, say within their first 60-90 days on the job. Subsequent administrations have not taken advantage of the opportunity. However, a commitment to some early training between the political and top career levels, each with the other, would be a enormously positive development in career-political relations.

Zimmerman also pointed the group to the problems of agencies having to deal with different waves of reform, almost fads, within each Administration, such as Management by Objectives during the Nixon/Ford years, reorganization under President Carter, and Managing for Results under Clinton. Such far-reaching changes led by those with short windows of time can lead to a lot of squandered time and resources. One executive said that appointees seem to come into service one of two ways, either “I’m not going to touch anything’ or “Gee, let’s push this button and see what happens. . .”.

Another fast growing problem with the Senior Executive Service is the splintering of the system. In an effort to address pay compression and promote flexibility within agencies, over twenty different classifications and specialized pay rates have developed since the inception of the SES in 1979. This movement has made the SES often difficult to characterize or to manage as a government-wide corporate resource. Sometimes, within agencies, the SES is the lowest paid system of the senior executives, and the problem of pay compression becomes overshadowed by the problem of pay equity. As one executive put it, “I may be paid \$30,000 below what a colleague is making in a comparable position but different system.”

Another failure of the Senior Executive Service system is the lack of mobility. The SES was based upon the assumption that those in it will be skilled in overall government management and be able to deploy their leadership across various organizations. Successive administrations routinely reach outside government for others to lead priority programs,

reforms, or reorganizations, but fail to take advantage of the talent within the SES. Instead, it seems that any executive mobility occurs in a negative situation or as a punitive measure. This again reflects on the tendency of many appointees to have negative expectations of the careerists who “served loyally for the last Administration,” as one executive characterized it.

One attendee faulted careerists for not achieving mobility as it was intended, as well. She said, “We think we’re federal judges. We think we have a lifetime appointment, but maybe we would benefit from realizing our positions are temporary. We should be thinking of where we can contribute next.”

“The constant cycling of the political leadership keeps you from getting stale.”

Agreeing, some thought that staying in one position too long can lead to staleness or even laziness in not entertaining new ideas. Strategic, purposeful moves by the political leadership can break up

some encrustation and generate a new sense of purpose in an executive and rejuvenate an entire agency. On the other hand, one executive suggested that merely the constant cycling of “the political leadership keeps you from getting stale.”

However, returning to the issue of negative feelings between careerists and new appointees, several in attendance noted that those in the SES are supposed to be neutrally competent. Alas, most agreed that, even if true in practice, this concept is not universally accepted. As one executive said, “The better you are with one set of leaders, the more you’re going to be viewed suspiciously by the next. And, frankly, the more you’re not going to have the same relationship with them.” Another added, “we bring our skills, but we bring a lot of baggage, too.”

Several of those present felt that the top leaders of the Administration, i.e., the President, should make more of an effort to welcome and accept the career leadership as their term begins. Several recalled the

meeting that President George H. W. Bush held with all of the Senior Executive Service just days after his Inauguration. The timing signaled its importance and truly, genuinely inspired the whole corps of career executives. Attendees described that meeting with phrases such as “made you feel part of a team,” “powerful,” “empowered us,” and “felt like part of the Presidential mandate.”

Another failure of the system is the fact that, rather than generalist managers, the corps is becoming a group of technical and functional

“The better you are with one set of leaders, the more you’re going to be viewed suspiciously by the next.”

experts. Granted, some scientific or technical positions require those capabilities (“management can’t be totally content free”) but, by and large, the technical aspects are supposed to be subordinate to the core managerial qualities. This is another significant hindrance to executive mobility. While this generalist management ability is a foundational component of the SES, Zimmerman urged the group not to let “the one-size-fits-all image become a

red herring.”

Many lessons have been learned and more will be learned as the Senior Executive Service, the federal government, and public service as a whole continue to evolve and adapt. One can only hope that those captaining the ship are as capable as our past and current executives have proven to be.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Senior Executives Association employed me soon after my graduation from college, and one of the most significant projects I completed during that time was the first monograph of the Morning of Reflections. Despite moving on to another job, I was honored when asked to work on the second monograph.

Reading the transcripts from the meetings reminded me of the personal transformation I underwent during my time with SEA. Always a government enthusiast, it was my time with SEA that gave substance to the beliefs I value. I always respected public service as a career, but now I genuinely cherish it. The dedication, loyalty, and passion that I witnessed, not only from our membership, but also from the staff and leadership, truly left a lasting impression on me.

Even now, I continue to work with the public sector and I am working on a graduate degree that will allow me to stay in public administration. I do not know where I will end up in my career or on what level of government my work will focus, but I am certain that the goals I was so ably introduced to while at SEA will be the focus of my life.

Working on this project was enlightening, enjoyable, and a privilege.

Travis M. Perry

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