

ON GOVERNMENT SERVICE

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ASPA Hawaii Chapter
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Good afternoon. It is a pleasure to be here to address such a distinguished group.

I would like to talk today about government service. I had the privilege and pleasure of serving in the State government for seven years. I enjoyed it immensely. I found it meaningful and exciting.

It concerns me that many people do not have a high regard for government officials or the role of government. This can be a negative self-fulfilling prophecy. If government is not held in high regard, then promising young people and seasoned professionals will often overlook or even avoid government as a career. This is a sad and strange predicament for a democracy. Today I would like to describe the satisfactions of a government career, discuss government's image problem, and suggest ways in which government can improve both its image and its performance.

The Meaning and Satisfaction of Government Service

Let me begin by giving you my four reasons why government service can be meaningful and satisfying. First of all, there is the meaning and satisfaction which come from serving others. Government work is called "public service" because it is simply that— service, to the whole public.

Serving others has been considered noble in many countries and cultures for thousands of years. Many of the world's religions and philosophies call upon us to find meaning in our own lives by serving the needs of others. Through service, we can make others happy, and attain our own spiritual salvation. There are many ways to serve others, in business, charitable organizations, churches, schools, and family life. Government is only one such way, but it is a major one in our society. If you wish to serve people, and dedicate yourself to their good, there is no better place to

be than in government service.

Second, government service is meaningful and satisfying because it calls upon the fullest and highest human capabilities. Government work is a deeply human activity. It involves all the people, all their strengths and weaknesses, all their feelings and beliefs. Government service is a challenge intellectually because it requires the government worker to deal with, daily, on a face-to-face basis, all of the values, philosophies, opinions, and biases of all the human beings in a society. Since these values, philosophies, and opinions often conflict to some degree, government work is also a challenge emotionally. It requires great patience, tolerance, and insight into the human condition. It requires love and compassion for others.

In short, government service calls upon the total person. The result is the richness of life which comes with tackling complex issues which affect the happiness or sorrow of other human beings. More often than not, the result is the thrill of using all that one knows, thinks, and feels, to understand, respond to, and solve the problems of the people we care about most— our families, friends and neighbors, our fellow members of society, the people of the land we love.

Third, government service is meaningful and satisfying because it is basically constructive and positive. There is conflict, of course, but the goal is to reach a consensus, a mutual compromise, a win-win solution, or a common benefit. The goal is to channel the conflict into socially beneficial action. Government seeks the greatest good for the greatest number. The skillful government official is able to discover areas of agreement between opposing groups, the basis for coalitions which will support needed action, and windows of opportunity based on the confluence of events and the availability of resources. The results can be positive, constructive, tangible, and visible.

Fourth, government service is meaningful and satisfying because our government is democratic. Two hundred years is not long in the history of human beings, and the democratic form of government practiced in the United States is still, in the great panorama of world history, something of an experiment. It is a form of government we are proud of, and making it effective and responsive to the needs of our people will always be an especially meaningful and satisfying activity.

I hope this gives you an idea of why I find government work so challenging,

satisfying, and meaningful. It is an opportunity to serve others, to use all of one's intellect and feelings, to be positive and constructive, and to make democracy a reality for our own generation and those to come.

Government's Image Problem

If government service is so meaningful and satisfying, why don't more people consider it seriously as a career? I suspect that one reason is the poor image of government. If so, why is the government's image so poor? Government is often portrayed as incompetent, slow, bureaucratic, and either non-responsive or very hard of hearing. Government officials are often portrayed as making decisions which are personal and political in the worst sense of those words. Why are these negative attitudes toward government so common? Let me suggest a few reasons.

First, government has many roles. Government provides basic services, such as roads, schools, parks, and water. These are necessities, and they are supported by taxes. But people want luxuries, not just necessities, and they don't want to pay taxes. What people buy with their taxes is not advertised on TV, and you can't get ahead of the Joneses by being the first on your block to have running water or send your children to a public school. This begrudging attitude toward the necessities of life is not limited to government— paying one's electric bill and telephone bill evoke the same feelings. So government has a role as a provider of necessities, and it gets no points for that.

Government also has the role of regulator. It regulates companies and their products, and it attempts to keep daily life as free as possible of crime and pollution. The people who benefit from the regulation generally like it, even while protesting the cost in taxes. Those who are the regulated, dislike it intensely, even if they called for the regulations in the first place. Government as regulator gets mixed reviews.

Government is developing a third role, that of partner with the private sector. This role holds great promise, especially in economic development, and solving social problems. As this role grows, government's image will improve. However, this is still a small role compared with government as provider or government as regulator.

In short, people realize that government is necessary, but that doesn't mean they have to like it. Somebody's got to do it, but it doesn't mean that that somebody is going to be popular. Thus, by its very nature, government starts at a disadvantage

in the image business.

There is another reason that people don't seem to like government. And that is that government, by its nature and goals, must be more tolerant, patient, cautious, and balanced in its approach than any of us wants to be in our own individual daily lives.

It is easy to understand. As individuals, we want things done *our* way. We want *our* values reflected in decisions. We want *our* benefits. And we want them *now*. We don't want to think about *other* people's values, and *other* people's benefits. We don't want to wait while *others* are allowed to speak. We don't want to hear that what we want to do might hurt somebody else. We don't want to be forced to take the full consequences of our actions into account— the impacts on people, the economy, or the natural environment. And so we are impatient with our government, which is a custodian of all the community's values, and is an instrument to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number. Government confounds our own innate desire to act on our own individual values and preferences. This angers us, and we blame government, not our own selfishness or narrow-mindedness.

Another reason government has a poor image today is that most of the problems faced by government cannot be solved by government alone. For one thing, problems are too complex. For another, the contribution to our society made in earlier years by the family, churches, and charitable organizations has decreased. Meanwhile, expectations have continued to rise. We seem to expect more things to be done for us, instead of doing them for ourselves. We are focused on our rights, rather than our responsibilities. Everything bad that happens to us is somebody else's fault, probably the government's fault. It is hard for government to solve problems in this new environment of complexity, lack of individual responsibility, and high expectations. Because it is so hard, government often fails, and this re-enforces the negative image.

Yet another reason government has a poor image is that like any other profession, there are people in government who break the law, or breach professional codes of ethics, or simply feather their own nests. Because of the importance of government, we hold government officials to a very high standard of moral and ethical behavior. Also because of the importance of government, any misconduct is likely to be broadcast by the press. I assume that there is no more wrongdoing in government than in any other field of endeavor, but we are— and should be— less tolerant of it, and we are more likely to hear about it. This again promotes a negative

image.

I want to distinguish high standards from high sensitivity. Many Americans, especially the press, have become highly sensitive to *any* behavior of political leaders and government officials which might offend *anybody*. In a pluralistic society, the only people who have never offended anybody are those who live very timid, shallow, humorless lives. Why would we want that kind of person to lead us? If a person has not had strong feelings, taken strong positions, and made mistakes along the way, how could he or she have wisdom, or knowledge, or humility? Our leaders need to be moral and ethical, and they also need to be human. People are now so sensitive that Jefferson, Lincoln, FDR, Henry V, Churchill, St. Paul and St. Augustine would all be unacceptable as leaders. This doesn't make sense. We need great leaders, and greatness comes from passion and experience, not from mere inoffensiveness.

The Misapplication of Business Standards to Government Performance

All of these reasons may be inherent in the nature of government and the nature of human beings. While we can do something about them, we may not be able to do very much. There is another reason, however, about which we *can* do something. The problem, as I see it, is that the public applies business standards to government work. Since these standards are not really appropriate, government does not measure up well, and the public image of government suffers accordingly.

The goals of government are defense, public health, safety, and welfare; education, equal opportunity, equal justice under the law; and public participation in our democracy. Governments deal with values and aspirations. The goals of business are stability, growth, and profit. Businesses deal with specific products and services.

Perhaps I can draw the contrast in more detail. While a government must look at the desires and needs of *all* the people, a business usually looks at the desires and needs of only *some* of the people. While a government must reconcile the different values of *many* different people, a business need only capitalize on the values of *one segment* or class of people. Governments deal with community values and public goods. Businesses deal with individual values and private goods. Governments glory in consensus and compromise, while businesses glory in competition and conquest.

The goals of business and government are sufficiently different to require different behavior. Accusing government of not behaving like business, or business

of not behaving like government, misses the point. Their behavior is not supposed to be the same.

That is why one of the least fruitful attacks on government, made almost every day, is that "those government people could never run a business." So what? There are a lot of business people who could never run a government. So what? The question is how well they do what they are supposed to do, not whether they fail to do something else.

Let me turn the tables to show you what I mean. Let's apply government standards to a business. The first standard to apply is majority rule. All company decisions must be backed by a majority of the market. Products and services must be designed and tested and re-designed and tested to meet almost everyone's values and tastes. A product cannot be produced or marketed until a coalition of buyers has been established which constitutes a majority of the public. A product or service cannot be provided unless it is the greatest good for the greatest number. Strong opposition from any minority, however small, will probably keep the product or service off the market completely, even if a majority of buyers wants it.

The second standard is public participation. Members of the public must be involved in determining which products and services to provide, how, when, where, and to whom. No new product or service can be developed or marketed until the company has held public hearings and informational meetings, has met with community task forces and citizen advisory committees, and has solicited comments through notices in the press.

The third standard is that all transactions must be public. Meetings of the company Board of Directors must be open to the public. The Board can go into executive session only to discuss personnel matters or confer with its attorneys on litigation matters. All corporate files must be open to the public. The company's budgets, expenditures, investments, and so on, are all public knowledge, to be debated in the press. Every decision, every failure, every power play or intrigue is public. Reporters must be allowed to interview leading company officials almost at will, and go through the company files when interested in doing so. Only personnel records can be kept confidential.

The fourth standard is that all important decisions of the company can only be made by the Board of Directors between January and April each year. This means all policy decisions, and all decisions regarding the allocation of resources for the

future, including all new products and services, must be made during those three months. Any major decision which needs to be made during the other nine months of the year will have to wait.

Is there any business which would willingly operate under these standards? Is there any business which could perform successfully in this environment? I think not. In a free enterprise system, companies are private, with private resources, and there is a need for private decision-making and operation. Companies also need to be dynamic, and respond immediately to changes in the marketplace. I don't think any major business could— or should— live in the fishbowl that government must live in, nor be as strapped as government is by complex regulations and procedures. My point is that if businesses were subject to the same public scrutiny and public procedures as government, their image would be no better than government, and might even be worse.

If businesses could not succeed under government standards of operation, why should we expect government to succeed under business standards? And yet we do. It's like flunking a dog for not measuring up as a cat. "Four legs and a tail, you know, but not really up to standard."

This, then, is a major reason that government has a poor image: the wrong standard is used in measuring government performance. The word which best capsulizes the difference may be "efficiency." Government was not designed to be efficient in the business world's sense of the word. It is purposely burdened with operational inefficiencies in order to fulfill democratic values. It is not usually fast, because it takes time to obtain public input, balance costs and benefits, reconcile opposing values and preferences, and design a course of action which is the greatest good for the greatest number. It is also not as efficient in the use of resources. That's because it deals with non-economic philosophies and beliefs which are difficult to measure mathematically, and require judgment rather than a numerical analysis for a result. In short, democracy was designed to be democratic. It was not designed to be efficient in the business world's sense of the word.

Business, at the same time, is not designed to be efficient in developing public policy for all the people. It does not have the mechanisms or the mandate from the people to do so. It makes its greatest social contribution when it responds to human needs for goods and services, and makes a return on its investment which it can use to grow, hire more people, and continue in business.

I suggest we call a truce on this question, and recognize that our people need both good business and good government. Each should be judged by its own standards and purposes. Government should be as efficient as possible in the business sense, but that is not its main purpose. Business should be socially sensitive in the government sense, but that is not its main purpose. Each has a different contribution to make to our overall happiness.

Improving Government's Image

To improve the image of government, we must enhance the public's understanding of the roles of government and the appropriate standards to apply to government performance. Ultimately, however, the image depends on government performance itself. It depends on excellence in leadership and administration, vision and commitment, professionalism and competence. This depends on many factors, including the talent and experience of those who are willing to enter government service, and our ability to train and develop our government teams to provide the best possible service we can provide.

In this regard, there are some things that government can learn from business. One of those things is managerial technique— how to be effective as a manager. Having served in the private, public, and non-profit sectors, I am convinced that managerial methods and skills are transferrable between organizations.

Students and practitioners of public administration can benefit by reading, discussing, and applying ideas in books and articles written for business managers. I suggest starting with well-known books such as *The Effective Executive* by Peter Drucker, or *The Art of Japanese Management* by Pascale and Athos, or *In Search of Excellence* by Peters and Waterman, or even *The One Minute Manager* by Blanchard and Johnson.

Government can also learn from business in terms of flexibility and organizational structure. Far greater flexibility in the assignment of human resources is desirable. So is greater flexibility in implementing policies set by the legislature or Congress. It is important that all organizations be able to adjust, respond to needs, and improve performance in a timely manner. Business experience in this area can be a stimulating reference point for government leaders.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me say again that government service is meaningful and satisfying. It is a noble calling, and a fulfilling career. Government has an image problem, and it will take some time to improve that image. Ultimately, it is excellent government performance that will improve the image. In that regard, government should be open to learning from the private sector in terms of management models and methods. In the meantime, I am sure that you are indeed providing the best government service that experience and dedication can provide. I salute you, I encourage you, and I wish you Godspeed in all your endeavors.