WHAT GOOD PUBLIC SERVANTS SAY ABOUT
HOW TO BE A GOOD PUBLIC SERVANT

Notes for remarks at the closing session of
the Executive Orientation Course, Touraine

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INTRODUCTION

- Michael Hicks told me that I could talk about whatever I wished at this last session of your course.

- The topic I have chosen is: "What good public servants say about how to be a good public servant". This is a rather personal subject, but I consider this group very much "en famille".

- I know that lectures and writings on this subject are of limited usefulness -- experience is by far the most effective teacher in our business. As Disraeli said:

  "Experience is the child of thought, and thought is the child of action. We cannot learn men from books."

- My main objective, then, is to suggest things to think about as we continue gaining public service experience.

- I realize that I am being somewhat presumptuous in trying to address this issue since I have only been in the public service for 15 years -- a shorter time than many of you.

- However, I have had the rare privilege of being assigned to positions during the last eight years in which I could observe most of our most senior public servants in action.

- At MSED from 1978-82, I sat at most of the weekly meetings of economic development deputies and at PCO from 1982-1987, I sat at all the meetings of the Coordinating Committee of Deputy Ministers. I have been able to watch the senior deputies work through some very difficult issues in rather difficult times.

- Like the rest of you I have worked closely with scores of highly effective Directors, DGS and ADMs.

- When I was assigned to my present position in March I had lunches with about a dozen of the current deputy heads to get their advice on managing a department.

- I would like to share with you some of what I have learned from these people -- either from what they have said, or what they have shown.
It would be entertaining, but inappropriate, to attribute points to individuals. I will avoid personalizing the observations by amalgamating them into a number of broad themes.

I will then summarize a few additional points that my battlescarred colleagues recommended to me as I left the cloistered meeting rooms of the central agencies.

I will then conclude with a few observations since crossing the river from the Langevin Block.

GENERAL THEMES

1. Integrity: Maintain "public service standards" of probity.

- Each of us occupies a position of public trust.

- We therefore have not only to act but be seen to act in accordance with the highest standards of probity and prudence.

- We're not in this for the money; in terms of our willingness to place other values ahead of material rewards we are morally superior to most other professionals. (We don't have to be bashful about this among ourselves. Indeed, there are many areas in which, as a profession, senior public servants are superior to others.)

(Those Burns Committee estimates of how much less we senior executives are paid than our private sector counterparts have recently been put to the empirical test with cases like Mickey Cohen, Ed Clark and Bob Rabinovitch who have left and Stanley Hartt and Cal Goldman who have joined us.)

- Given that we are making a financial sacrifice of tens of thousands of dollars to work in the government, for the sake of a few more hundred dollars a year, give the Crown the benefit of the doubt in all judgement calls concerning expenses and personal benefits.

- Honour confidences.

- Never lie: The whole system is based on trust.
- Our personal reputations are our greatest assets in the federal public service -- that which allows us to get things done in the system.

2. Roles: Understand your role and the workings of our system of democracy.

- Understand your general responsibilities as a public servant vis-à-vis your subordinates, your superiors, your Minister, Parliament, the public.

- Understand your group's responsibilities within your department.

- Learn about the relationships between your institution and other agencies.

- After all that, recognize that a key requirement of a senior public servant is the "tolerance of ambiguity".

- Observe the workings of power and influence: their sources, applications and constraints on their use.

- This is not a university; we work in the real world where things can look pretty messy up close. We can't be too squeamish. As Bismark said:

  "people with weak stomachs should not observe the manufacture either of sausages or new laws"

- Keep your eye both on the ideal (what is "best" for Canada) and on the reality (what is possible in the political situation facing the Minister and the Government).

- Be practical.

- As public servants, we have the privilege of giving advice and then the duty of carrying out faithfully the decision made by our Ministers.

3. Institutions and People: Respect institutional relationships but deal with people.

- Structures are there for a reason -- use them (or have them changed).

- Maintain clear lines of accountability.

- Let your managers manage.

- Don't play favourites.
- Ensure that any immediate subordinate (or superior) is kept informed of any dealings you have with his subordinate (or superior).

- Don't ask two people to do the same thing; everybody should know who is responsible for what.

- Get to know the people you will need before you need them.

- Always ask, "who in the Department X?" when you hear that "Department X says ..."; as an EX, you should know the people who claim to speak for departments.

- Get to know your top 100 subordinates.

- Talk up your own people outside.

- Be generous with praise inside.

- Maintain a sense of perspective and humour.

4. Communication: Constantly work at communicating.

- Avoid surprises.

- Establish atmosphere of trust, sharing and openness in internal communications.

- Be clear to your subordinates about what you want and how you want to get it.

- Practise what you preach -- communicate by example.

- Give advice (and encourage your advisors to give you advice) "without fear or favour".

- Work on your own written and oral communications skills.

5. Initiative and Follow-through: Get things going and then deliver.

- Use action-forcing processes: (e.g., scheduling meetings; personal lists of objectives and deadlines).

- Develop a follow-up system to prevent requests and good ideas from dissipating into the ether (e.g., an ongoing "to do" list; a BF system).

- Encourage "consultative activism" among your people.
- Cultivate a sense of "residual responsibility" in your people so that they stick with the task beyond where their initial responsibility ends (e.g., the delivery of the hand-written draft to the secretary) right to where the task is completed (e.g., the delivery of the briefing note to the Minister at home).

- Instil a sense of dynamism in your organization -- people should feel that things are moving.

- Keep asking what difference any particular initiative will actually make -- if it won't make any difference, then shift your resources to where they will make a difference.

6. **Commitment:** Work hard.

- Understand the 100% that needs to be done and do the 73% that can be done with the time and resources available -- and recognize the consequences of the difference.

- The harder you work at a problem the deeper understanding you acquire, the more able you are to persuade others and the more you will be able to deliver.

- We don't have to be workaholics -- but neither should we be ashamed of hard work. The Balliol College dream of "effortless superiority" has its attractions but none of us know many good senior public servants who do not work hard.

7. **Learning:** Continue to learn and to innovate.

- Know how much you don't know.

- Observe the masters in action (while recognizing that no one is master of everything).

- Government is an evolving process and we have to keep abreast.

- Keep trying new approaches to determine what works best in the particular circumstances you face at the time.

- Work on the elusive ability called "good judgement", recognizing that:

> "Good judgement is invariably the result of experience and experience is frequently the result of bad judgement"
- Therefore, try to learn from your own, and preferably others', mistakes.

- Most managerial skills can be improved with effort, practice and self discipline.

- Don't hesitate to ask for advice -- in 15 years I have not encountered anyone in Ottawa who has refused to go out for lunch or to provide help when asked.

ADVICE GIVEN TO A NEW DEPUTY

- The PCO gives each new deputy head an information kit with detail on statutory responsibilities. (The paper "The Office of Deputy Minister" is generally available and all senior executives should read it.)

- Much of the advice I received on becoming a Deputy Minister consisted of variations of the seven themes just outlined.

- Perhaps the greatest emphasis was placed on the need to focus on the department's people and the need to improve internal communication. These issues were discussed in depth at Paul Tellier's strategic workshop held at Montebello in May, and each of you has no doubt heard about the work associated with the deputies' collective efforts.

- An additional theme my colleagues emphasized was:

8. Discipline: Maintain a "system of discipline" within the organization.

- People must know that systems exist and that rules are to be followed.

- The deputy and all senior managers have a very important role here on setting the example.

- Good behaviour has to be rewarded (and seen to be rewarded) -- and the opposite for bad behaviour.

- A final -- and often the most important -- special responsibility of the Deputy Minister is, of course:


- The Deputy is in the unique position of being the place where the political and bureaucratic worlds meet.
- One of my colleagues refers to the position as the bridge between the two camps.

- Another uses an hourglass metaphor with the public service below and the Cabinet, Parliament and political parties above -- with the Minister and Deputy occupying the narrow neck.

- Another compares relations between the Minister and Deputy to a marriage, where both sides must constantly work on the relationship.

RECENT OBSERVATIONS

- My first six months at Consumer and Corporate Affairs have served to re-inforce the validity of the nine themes noted above. I would add a tenth.

10. Luck: If you can't necessarily be good, be lucky.

- My own luck is holding (I inherited a super management team, Minister and ministerial staff and have had to face few policy or administrative crises).

- One minor revelation is that you have to be very careful in what you ask for (or more resources will be expended than the request deserves).

- Another surprise was how great a scope there is for initiative on the part of the senior management team -- and how few constraints are actually imposed by central agencies.

- A continuing surprise during my six months as deputy head of CCAC is how much fun it is.

- I hope that each of you are lucky enough to leave Touraine and go back to positions where you, too, will have fun.

- Thank you.