

Keystone State Chapter, American Society for Public Administration 10th Anniversary and Awards Ceremony Address – September 9, 2022

Keynote Address by David Margolis

At this 10th Anniversary and Awards Ceremony for ASPA's Keystone State Chapter, it is an honor to address such a distinguished group of individuals.

I appreciate this opportunity to share with you some personal thoughts about public administration.

In accepting Dr. McGuigan's offer to speak tonight, I stipulated that I would not address the great issues that confront public administration. This gathering is filled with people who have extensive knowledge about the art, science, teaching, and practice of public administration. Therefore, I will focus on three qualities that my experience suggests are fundamental to the success of our work as public servants. These qualities are humility, respect, and trust.

Before I discuss these qualities, I will ask for your feedback and draw upon US Census Bureau data to highlight the exceptionality of this group compared with the US population.

How many of you have earned a high school diploma? That is an educational experience that you share with about 90% of the US population.

How many have completed or expect to complete undergraduate college studies to earn an associate or bachelor's degree? That puts you in an select group of about one-third of the US population.

How many have completed or expect to complete an advanced degree to earn a master's, doctoral, or professional degree? Less than 15% of the US population has completed an advanced degree.

You are to be commended for seizing the opportunity for higher education and successfully completing rigorous academic work. You have earned college degrees that provide the gateway to a class of knowledge workers—knowledge workers who receive a status and a level of compensation that far exceeds most groups in the overall population. There are many aspects of privilege in our society, and you represent one type of privileged group.

With privilege comes responsibility. Your commitment to public service shows that you have accepted that responsibility. A further challenge is to recognize that your education puts you in a distinct minority of the population. Nearly two-thirds of the US population has not completed an undergraduate college education and more than 85% of the population has not earned an advanced college degree. The experience and

world-view of this majority of the population is distinctly different from and widely diverse compared to that of our public administration community.

That leads back to the interrelated qualities of humility, respect, and trust that are fundamental to achieving significant and lasting results. In the spirit of full disclosure, I did numerous dumb things during my career that fell short of these desired qualities. That said, some of the best and most enduring lessons learned came from the failure to live up to these ideals and the failure to achieve desired results.

Humility

I'll start with humility. My first job in state government was as an analyst with the Governor's Office of the Budget. This was the mid-1970's when systems analysis and computers were transforming private and public sector organizations. Pennsylvania state government was a champion of Planning-Programming-Budgeting as a more systematic way to develop, to implement, and to fund programs and projects. There was an all-too-common belief among public administrators that data and analysis gathered by a group of highly educated people were all that was needed to establish good public policy. I recall an informal discussion in which several of the budget analysts suggested that technocrats such as themselves could solve society's most persistent problems if only the politicians would get out of their way. I was horrified. My response—as best as I can recall—was that I would be afraid to live in a society run by unelected bureaucrats who made decisions over the rest of society without the constraints of the messy democratic process.

In my view, the lack of humility exemplified by those budget analysts contributed to the distrust of government that was seized upon by Ronald Reagan in the 1980's. A notable quote by the 40th president was "The nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I'm from the Government, and I'm here to help." This statement could only have resonated if a large portion of the electorate believed that government policies were NOT being made in their best interest.

Later, when I was serving as an elected school board member, one of my favorite education authors was fond of saying "No one has a corner on wisdom." For me, this was a much-needed reminder to seek out people with divergent life experiences and opinions. Was public concern about proposed initiatives simply resistance to innovative change or was that public concern legitimate pushback to fashionable education trends that did not fit their local needs? Even though agreement among community members and agreement among board members often was not possible, seeking to understand opposing positions helped me to focus on issues rather than personalities. It also facilitated my efforts toward becoming a more effective and less abrasive public official.

In the field of public administration, it is unrealistic to presume that there is one correct way to proceed. I would recommend considering three factors: 1) Any proposed course of action will affect stakeholders in varying ways and trade-offs are required; 2) An approach that has worked in one place may not be transferrable to another situation

with a different political, economic, or cultural context; and 3) In a constantly changing world, a solution that worked in the past has no assurance of success in the future.

Management books about “best practices” tend to preach that success is guaranteed by following a prescribed set of techniques. If this were reality, there would be no need for further intellectual inquiry and we all would be adopting the same “miracle solutions.” Recognizing that the public administrator lives in a world that is multifaceted and ever changing, we must take a more humble and more difficult approach to best practices. John Bryson, author of *Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations*, sums up his approach with three words: “Adapt don’t adopt.”

For public administrators, humility is acknowledging that while we bring specialized knowledge and experience to solving problems, variables are infinite and “no one has a corner on wisdom.”

Respect

Moving from humility to respect, the most succinct statement I have found about the interrelationship between these two qualities comes from 19th-century moral philosopher Henri Frederic Amiel. He stated that “There is no respect for others without humility in one's self.” In recent years, much has been written about the general lack of respect in public discourse. I will offer my take on four basic questions that we should ask ourselves as public servants:

- 1) Do I demonstrate that every person and every role is important?
- 2) How much effort do I put into listening?
- 3) Am I tolerant of differing opinions?
- 4) Do I seek out and actively encourage differing opinions?

For the sake of time, I will dwell only on the first question: Do I demonstrate that every person and every role is important?

Sadly, too many in our society tend to consider some people and their roles to be inferior because they are associated with less money, less power, or less education. I was encouraged by the appreciation expressed for “essential workers” during the initial phase of the Covid pandemic. Perhaps this sentiment can become a lasting change in how our society values individuals and their work. A recent Gallup Poll indicated that 71% of Americans now approve of labor unions. Following a low of 48% in 2009, approval of unions has grown steadily during the past 13 years. Further research may reveal whether there is, indeed, a trend toward greater appreciation of essential workers, as well as greater respect for their contributions to the economy and to the quality of our daily lives.

Public administrators need to be role models in both word and deed in their interactions with co-workers and with the public. The best example that comes to mind is from a hospital whose job description for a custodian provides a purpose statement that reads simply “to save lives.” What a wonderful expression of how this type of work is an essential part of a team effort to treat patients in immediate need of medical care.

For interactions with the public, demonstrating that every stakeholder and every stakeholder’s role is important can be supported by the remaining three basic questions:

- 2) How much effort do I put into listening?
- 3) Am I tolerant of differing opinions?
- 4) Do I seek out and actively encourage differing opinions?

Trust

The third quality to discuss with you tonight is trust. Just as humility can lead to respect, so can respect lead to trust. Three questions regarding trust seem appropriate:

- 1) Do I demonstrate sincere concern for all team members and stakeholders?

Demonstrating sincere concern for others may seem obvious, but a perception of insincerity or a few careless negative trigger words can undermine all other efforts to build trust.

- 2) Am I willing to admit when I am wrong?

There may be no more difficult but disarming act than to admit to others that you are wrong.

- 3) Do I accept alternative solutions from others?

Setting aside what you personally believe to be the most effective course of action can be almost as painful as admitting you are wrong. Adopting a reasonable solution for which your work team or stakeholders have a clear vision of success can often achieve a quicker and more positive result.

Speaking more specifically about the challenge for public administrators to build trust among stakeholders, we must strive to facilitate rather than to impose solutions. Public acceptance and public perception are essential. We need to demonstrate that a problem has been thoroughly explored and that diverse views have been considered in formulating a solution. Also, we need to do a much better job communicating the success of policies and programs that already have been implemented to improve the quality of life for those who we serve.

Combining Humility, Respect, and Trust

Having explored humility, respect, and trust, I will attempt to pull together my somewhat diffuse collection of observations. To do so, I submit for your consideration a practical example of one management practice that ties together these three qualities.

The After-Action-Review or AAR process was developed by the US Army in the 1970's. Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization* called the AAR "one of the most successful organizational learning methods yet devised." He also concluded that "most every corporate effort to graft this truly innovative practice into their culture has failed because, again and again, people reduce the living practice of AAR's to a sterile technique." I will leave Dr. Senge's antithesis for another day and suggest that the AAR is a laudable management tool that embodies the elements of humility, respect, and trust.

The AAR is a short de-briefing session designed to engage all members of the team in sharing their perspectives as soon as possible after an event. The AAR consists of a limited number of questions. One version of these questions is:

- 1) What was supposed to happen?
- 2) What actually happened?
- 3) What went well and should be sustained?
- 4) What did not go well and should be changed?

In line with the quality of humility, the premise of the AAR is that the plan and execution—as directed by the leader—could be improved for the next similar event. Furthermore, the assumption is that individual team members will offer diverse perspectives that will clarify what happened and generate suggested changes that might not be apparent to the leader.

Respect for the input of team members is emphasized in that the leader typically serves as facilitator with limited speaking time.

Respect builds trust if the leader and the team accept the inevitable divergence of observations and opinions as participants recall the event from their individual roles. The ultimate trust builder is whether the organization routinely changes and grows from the information provided from AAR's.

In the spirit of Dr. Senge's learning organization, public administrators can reinforce the qualities of humility, respect, and trust each day by asking the question: What did I learn today? Then, based on new insights, you can go about the business of developing innovative solutions to difficult problems. With your education, experience, and emerging insights, you can take action to advance the theory and practice of public

administration so that we can improve the quality of life for those who we are dedicated to serve.

Thank you for this opportunity to present my comments as we celebrate the ongoing public service contributions of our ASPA members and the achievements of the 2022 Keystone State Chapter award recipients.