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Leaving a Leadership Legacy

By Christine G. Springer

A 2005 Harvard University study of confidence in leadership found that almost two-thirds of Americans think that this country is suffering from a leadership crisis. The study's respondents showed little confidence in the honesty, integrity and ethics of leaders in sectors ranging from business and religion to all levels of government. They also showed little faith in leaders' knowledge, skills and capability to inspire loyalty and enthusiasm from followers. In a society looking for answers, we also are experiencing a time when record numbers of leaders will be retiring. Most of them want to leave a mark in their field and to create a lasting imprint by their work being appreciated and remembered.

Values do make a difference. In a recent discussion with an elected official regarding the viability of legacy building in the public sector, I was asked what was to keep a successor from throwing out any changes, i.e., the legacy, that had been created.

In fact, there is nothing to prevent a successor from "throwing everything out", but it is possible to make that undertaking virtually impossible by building a legacy founded in values, not process, in establishing a "do right" agency culture, not one based on political expediency. Most successors will attempt to change some of the work processes, some may even change the vision and that may be appropriate if circumstances change sufficiently to warrant a shift in direction. Few, however, will be willing to expend the effort necessary to change an existing culture and the underlying value system, especially when the value system is institutionalized and firmly linked to constituent needs, personal behaviors, and embedded in the agency work processes. Any attempts by successors to change a legacy so established will tend to be more cosmetic than substantive.

A public manager's legacy is the institutionalization of clear, unambiguous values and a vision, both of which prominently align with constituent/ stakeholder wants and needs. The Senior Executive Service (SES) of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management declared some time ago that - "As we move into the 21st century, Government executives face special challenges. They must be *visionary* leaders with a strong *commitment* to public *service*. They must be able to apply *people skills* to motivate their employees, build *partnerships*, and communicate with their *customers*." As words have meaning, those emphasized carry a strong value-laden message. That is why leaving a leadership legacy amounts to serving others while leading, never taking trust for granted, being able to reflect upon moments of courage and accepting the fact that sometimes leaders fail at their endeavors.

The word "visionary" is especially germane as again noted by the SES because public managers need to "Develop and implement an *organizational vision* that *integrates* key national and program goals, priorities, *values*, and other factors." Vision can and should change as constituent/stakeholder needs change, but what should not change are the underlying values and behaviors used to carry it out. This is equally true at all levels of government.

The next link in forging a public sector legacy, after collaboratively creating a shared vision and set of values, is to introduce departmental and employee behaviors that reflect those values as well and organizational support for them. The way we act, the behaviors we exhibit, are direct reflections of the values that we hold. While no one can change what is in another person's heart or mind, a legacy-in-the-making holds staff accountable for their behaviors and, by extension, the values that are important (or not) to the agency. Once values-based behavior is defined, then the work of aligning the vision and work processes to operate within the articulated value boundaries can begin. In the final analysis, leadership is personal. People need to know more about the leader than the fact that the leader is their boss. They want to know the leader's values, beliefs, aspirations and dreams as well as who has influenced them most, how they prepared for the job that they are doing, what drives them to do what they do, and what they are really like as a person. By knowing the leader, they are able to trust him or her as a human being. After all, it is the quality of relationships with others that most determines a legacy.

This is all the more important due to a need for higher levels of motivation given the results of recent studies by the Gallup Organization and others indicating that 55 percent of the U.S. workforce is not engaged or motivated by their work and another 17 percent is actively disengaged or demotivated by their work. It has been estimated that the cost to the U.S. economy for this loss in productivity is as much as \$300 billion every year.

The practical and anticipated outcomes of the alignment process are results that reflect the values of the agency, even when the results are negative. It's these value-driven work processes and results that are the basis for the agency's and for the manager's "reputation". This reputation becomes the legacy of the visionary individual who foresaw the need to, and the benefit in, creating an alignment of vision, values, and behaviors. Indeed, whether or not agencies consciously acknowledge it, the results they are providing today, and the work processes and behaviors by which they are doing so, already speak to the "reputation" of the agency and to the values of the person in charge.

When the agency's values-driven reputation is reinforced with an appraisal/feedback process and a new hire orientation that supports the desired behaviors and underlying values, a successor would be hard pressed to throw everything out. The legacy of aligned vision, values, and behaviors is engrained within each and every person in the agency.

Is this a lot of work? Yes. Does it take courage? Yes. But public managers choosing to do this work are truly servant leaders. They both serve and follow with an understanding that their success can only be enjoyed when it is also a success for others. They remain open to learning. Humility comes from grasping these fundamental ideas and realizing that legacies are built upon the legacies of those who have come before them and those who labor alongside them. Loyalty is not something a boss demands, just as a company cannot demand loyalty from customers. Customers and citizens decide whether or not to continue to give their support and their business based upon responsiveness. That is why a loyal constituency is won when people, consciously or otherwise, judge the leader to be capable of solving their problems and meeting their needs.

When people talk about leadership, they often use the word *passion*. That word comes from the Latin word for suffering. Leadership is hard work. It is not easy despite what we, or others, may

write about how things get done. One certainty is that what people will say about a leader will be less about what has been achieved for themselves and more about what has been achieved for others and for the public interest.

Leaving a legacy is all about making a difference and that means taking stands on things that matter. It takes courage to do so. To leave a legacy of lasting significance means acting courageously and there is no money-back guarantee. Doing their best may simply not be enough. There are always forces that are outside their control. It is also true that every leadership virtue taken to excess can also become a vice and every strength, a weakness. That is why leaders learn quickly to have the humility and the grace to admit that they depend on others as much as others depend upon them and that leadership is hard work. It has been said that there are two kinds of people in life: those who make things happen and those who wonder what happened. Leaders have the ability to make things happen. People who don't know how to make things happen for themselves won't know how to make things happen for others – and what they do with their future means the difference between simply leaving a track record or leaving a legacy.

Legacies aren't just wishful thinking. They are the result of determined doing. The legacy that public managers choose to leave will be based upon the life they lead. They never know with any certainty whose life they will touch. What they do know is that they can truly make a difference as a public manager and that they have an opportunity to leave whatever they do better than WE found it.