

NQI
Quest for Excellence
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I have been asked to speak on “The Quest for Excellence in Public Service: where to begin?”

It’s a good question. I would suggest that the place to start is with an understanding that the greatest enemy of achieving excellence in public service is the accountability regime, and the associated fear of failure, lack of tolerance for mistakes, and whack-a-mole mentality.

The minute you let avoiding failure become your motivator, you are heading down the path of mediocrity. Only the mediocre are at their best all the time. The people who stumble are the ones who are moving. Today, October 1, was the date Roger Maris hit his record breaking 61st home run in 1961. He had to take a lot of swings, most of them misses, to achieve that level of excellence. He didn’t stand there thinking “Oh, if I strike out, it will be embarrassing” and then do nothing. He stepped up to the plate.

Senator Hugh Segal told the IPAC audience at their convention this summer that: “Public servants need the courage to make mistakes, and politicians must commit to stand behind them.” (that’s *stand* behind, not *hide* behind). I understand one Minister put it: “If you admit to a mistake, you’ve just made a second one.”

I made a mistake the day I joined the public service. No, that didn’t sound right. I made my first mistake on my first day on the job. It was 1972, I had a long beard, sandals, corduroy jeans, you may remember the look, and I was reporting for work at the Millhaven Penitentiary as a caseworker. Well, I hadn’t dressed for success, at least, not as the prison service then saw it. The officer on the gate greeted me with a “Who the (f*bomb) are you?” I replied “Your new case worker.” He replied, “Like heck” and wouldn’t let me in. Eventually, we got it worked out through personnel and the barber shop.

In business, there is an expression:
WGM=WGD what gets measured is what gets done

I suggest the public service equivalent is:
WGNP=WGA what gets negative publicity is what gets avoided

But it should be:
EVP + MFE = ESTC evidence based policy plus mission focused effort leads to excellence in service to citizens

So the first step is to accept that mis-steps made in pursuit of the mission are embraced as learning, while errors of hubris and personal greed are not.

It is vastly more amusing to read of errors, absurdities, and disasters. So there will always be more about Teddy Weatherall and the \$700 Paris lunch, or Radwanski and travel advances, than improved PS service ratings. Those behaviours, please note, were not mission-focused in quest of excellence in public service. And it was appropriate they be detected and dealt with.

Second, There has been a widely-held wisdom infused throughout government that if you leave things alone, you leave them as they are. If you do what the manual says, you won't get into trouble. Now the evangelists of Gov2.0 say that is all changing, we have to be innovative, we have to continuously improve, we have to use new social media tools.

But the more things change, the more it is brought home that the fundamental principles of good public service remain the same – one of which was articulated by Britain's Attorney General, Sir Francis Bacon, in 1625: "Those who will not apply new remedies must expect new evils; for time is the greatest innovator." As analysts now talk about "wicked problems" and "problems that cannot be solved by one agency or one government" it has become clear even to those of us steeped in tradition that we are in need of new remedies and new partnerships or networks.

Excellence really cannot be a solitary journey.

It's not just that technology is driving us. The underlying reality has always been the same – the fact that many in public service lost sight of it does not put the universal principles in abeyance. At Canada's founding, in 1867, British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli observed: "Change is inevitable in a progressive country. Change is constant." I have been hearing this lately, expressed as "We are now in permanent white water" as if it were a new phenomenon. It isn't. Perhaps what is new is that we have a generation of new professionals who know more about some things than their elders. As noted in the book *Geeks and Geezers*, they want to change the world, rather than just make a living.

The mystery, as you know, is how to be innovative in organizations built for stability, how to take risks without being wrong, how to network across silos, how to change the employee culture. **The second step is to become a good networker, a team builder, one who learns from others**

Which brings me to my third step: have a conceptual model of what excellence looks like and how to get there.

I have a great job. It is delightful, to work with excellence, to interview people doing an excellent job, or working towards it.

So I want to share with you what won't be in the newspaper today, because it is a good story.

Vaclav Havel has said “Follow those who seek the truth, run from those that have found it.” I would translate that to say:

“Follow those who seek excellence. Be wary of those who claim to have achieved it.”

So I wanted to share with you today two research-based frameworks about the journey toward excellence. One based on research done by Jim Collins in his Good to Great project, and one based on research Ole Ingstrup and I did into excellence in public service.

The Journey

From poor to good, and good to excellent, not poor to excellent. Good can be the enemy of excellence, if people become complacent.

Three Pillars

- Research in 40 organizations in 14 countries
- We learned from the best, in their environment – PSC of Lebanon not going to teach PSC of Canada much, but Hassan Chalak taught us courage – dodging bullets on the way to work
- Found they did not rely on structural reform but on management techniques
- Found they all asked the same questions, had a Socratic dialogue approach to learning

Aim: know where they are going, what their contribution to society will be. Deeply ingrained into mission and daily activities

Character: strong sense of who they are and what is important. People exude a sense of respect, integrity, caring, trust, openness, and a desire to learn

Execution: they get things done. They value evidence-based policy. They achieve their aim and demonstrate their character through use of management tools that are a means to an end, not an end in themselves.

Aim

Mission It used to be that only well-performing organizations had mission statements, but now it has become popular. The difference is in excellent orgs the mission has become a constant presence in operations, entrenched in the minds and daily activities. It is not a plaque hung on the wall that people debate. It is a reality they live.

Leadership:

We found the same principles supported good leadership in diverse cultures and settings. The need to listen, involve, and delegate; disperse leadership across the org; show commitment to employees, and consistency between leadership style and the mission.

Consistency was also demanded of the org's leaders – they didn't tolerate Mother Teresa in one office and Attila the Hun in the next.

Word and deed must be in harmony, and I find the flip side in poorly performing organizations – staff complain that leaders lie to them, by saying one thing and doing another.

They realized leadership goes beyond their borders. Our research is now ten years old, but these orgs were already networking, educating the public, reaching out.

The leaders took the long view, both of their own careers and the org. – four DMs in 50 years at one place, never any of this leadership churn. More Ivan Fellegi types than the nameless rotation.

And the organization made a conscious effort to:

- Analyse the situation and determine a model of leadership to use
- Train the management team in a common model
- Share that model with the staff, tell them what leadership they were entitled to, and to complain if they didn't get it
- Obtained feedback on the model's use and effectiveness
- Updated and adjusted the model and the training

Accountability

At its core, accountability involves explaining what you are doing, telling your story and living with the consequences.

Even pre-Gomery, systems focused on finding the bad, not the good. But these orgs had found ways to measure their results and link them to the mission achievement. Deviations were dealt with, success celebrated. Incentives and rewards were common.

Together, mission, leadership, and accountability provided a powerful sense of direction. They took aim at noble goals. They had setbacks, but they were able to surface problems and mistakes, deal with them, and get back on course far faster than orgs that denied or buried problems.

Character

People

“People are our most important resource had already become a tired cliché when we did our research. The orgs we studied used the phrase but were quick to back it up with evidence – from family-friendly workplaces to training and development to empowerment.

Surveys, 360s, open doors, bearpit and town hall meetings.

There were lots of diverse applications of the same principle. In D.C., the weapons development research group put a day care on site, which was great, because so many parents were new to the city, with no family backup, with daycare difficult to find. And in Cairo, the Treasury Board set up sports leagues for staff and their children. If one took a simple best practices approach, and provided day care in Cairo, they might be some resentment – that is a family responsibility. And if, in D.C., where privacy is important, one said “bring your kids to the company soccer league” you might get an indignant response. But the principle underlying both is the same – seek out what things the organization can do to make family life better for the employees.

Communication

From email to tea with the boss in Malta, they had multiple channels of two way communication. They networked with a variety of partners – Nova Scotia fisheries had 100 inter-agency partnerships

Trust

Trust is, was, and will be at the same time the glue that holds an organization together and the lubricant that facilitates movement and action. It reduces stress and fear. It is a prerequisite for honesty and openness and learning.

Execution

Management Tools

To our surprise, they didn't subscribe to one management guru or one tool – such as the Balanced Scorecard or Stephen Covey. Many used those two, but others were in play as well. The common factor was they studied the tools available, picked the ones best suited to their needs, and adapted them and blended them.

Teamwork

They had a sense of teamwork, even if working in a cubicle, that they were all in this together, working toward the same mission. They partnered with each other and other orgs.

Change Management

We had expected orgs to share a change management model, such as John Kotters. They didn't, but they had all given thought to the process, and had one in place that integrated and adapted various models.

Adding Socrates

Seek truth by asking questions – often highly provocative and even embarrassing, but leading to a dialogue and trust that answers will be found.

Good to Great in the Public Sector

Jim Collins research

Leadership – Level Five leaders who combine a compelling personal humility with a fierce professional will and unwavering resolve. As Premier McGuinty described his head of the public service, Tony Dean: “Fearless in advice, loyal in implementation.”

- Focus on enduring success of the organization, not themselves
- From within the org, long timers
- Top priority: Get the right people on the bus, then get them in the right seats. The statement “People are our greatest asset” is a crock. People can be your greatest liability. The *right people* are your greatest asset.
- In the public service, Collins told me “you have more forces out of your own control, that are unpredictable; they can be political, or a change in management, or moving to another country to fight a war. My first and biggest message is you can’t control the factors above you, so focus on building your particular mini-bus into a pocket of greatness.”
- Change the focus from process to results, from policy to implementation
- Focus on things you are passionate about
- Work with people you really like – my reflections on teams
- Assume there are timeless principles that underlie what you do. That you can discover these principles, learn and apply them
- You move from poor to good, and good to great. Good is the enemy of the great, because people become complacent.

Select leaders who:

- Deliver on commitments
- Become better at what they do
- Do not take excessive credit for results, or cast blame for failures
- Build work units, mini-buses, that continue to perform well, after they leave. How many of you are familiar with DMs and ADMs who are parachuted into an org, immediate remark on how problem-riddled it is. And how miraculously, it is all better 18 months later when it is time for them to leave. I always thought it odd that orgs that were performing well under one DM immediately became poor performers when the DM left. Whether that was just politicking, and not true; or true, doesn’t matter. Neither is proof of good leadership
- Simultaneously achieve current objectives while building org capacity for the future

To become better, Collins says, ask yourself:

1. What am I passionate about?
2. What can I be the best at?
3. What resources can I harness? What results can I achieve?

Be committed to the long haul. In the private sector, it took good firms four years to develop their better strategy, and they kept it for 10, 40, even 60 years.

It was like a flywheel. It takes effort, turn by turn, to get momentum going. Or like pushing a boat away from the dock. You push and push and push some more, until finally it begins to slowly move. And even after you stop pushing, the momentum continues.

Core values don't change. Core purpose doesn't change. What changes is what you do to stimulate progress, the specific subgoals, the operational practices.

In CSC, we had a core value of using only the minimum amount of force needed to control inmates, and to keeping them at the lowest security level that we could safely do. A new minister, questioned that: and was told by the DM "Well, yes, we could change that. We could say 'We will sometimes use more force than is necessary, but we won't have any policy on it.' Or we could say 'We will always use slightly more force than necessary,' or ... you get the picture. And so did the Minister. And the core value remained the same. And when the Minister was confronted on the issue by a more conservative member, he essentially repeated the DM's statement.

Excellence requires the courage to speak truth to power.

Or take the Girl Guides, whose activities were teaching cooking and sewing and how to say no to boys. Which isn't much of a draw these days. But their underlying mission was, and should remain, how to help young women become competent in life. And that is now done through computer camp, mentoring, and social action.

And a last point. Collins found that innovation is not the key driver of success. He found that the more your world is changing and discontinuous, the more success comes from the discipline of staying with your core. Being so right that when the world changes, you can stay with the cause.

The P.M.s Task Force on public service, with Paul Tellier and Don Mazankowski, advised the PS to simplify its HR systems and focus on performance management. This echoes Collins findings. And what new professionals are telling me.

Great orgs are not that much better at who they hire. But they are better at separations. They have the courage to remove poor fits. Bad fits aren't always bad people. In great orgs, employees are gone in two years, or stay a long time. In other organizations, it is more a normal distribution.

Cognos CEO Ron Zambonini said; "persistent non-performers must go. By keeping poor performers you lose your best performers." The PS needs firm resolve and persistence in dealing with this issue. The deadwood has to go.

Think of the show Survivor. Would you like the option to vote somebody off your island? It goes back to universal principles, the law of the farm.

I farmed 40 years ago. It is much different today. From horse drawn plow to giant tractors with air conditioning and a beer fridge.

But the laws are the same – you have to prepare the soil, you have to plant the seed, you have to provide water and nourishment, and you have to remove the weeds. And at the end of the season, you have a celebration and Thanksgiving.

I told that story to the executive committee of the Atlantic region in 1979 when they faced a 10% across the board cut. I boldly pronounced that if they got the right 10%, things would actually improve. At the end of the exercise, only two people were declared redundant, and I was one of them.

Summary, for those embarking on a quest for organizational excellence, I would suggest these steps

1. It requires making mission-focused mistakes and being tolerant of them
2. It is a journey best taken with others – network, teambuild, learn from others
3. You would benefit from having a conceptual model of what excellence looks like
4. Realize it is a journey without a finish line.

Thank you for your kind attention. I look forward to hearing Vic's thoughts, and your thoughts, in the discussion which follows.

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